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The Way of the Spirit

BY

H. RIDER HAGGARD

AUTHOR OF "JESS," "STELLA FREGELIUS," ETC.

"Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth . . . and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes; but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment."

"To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God."

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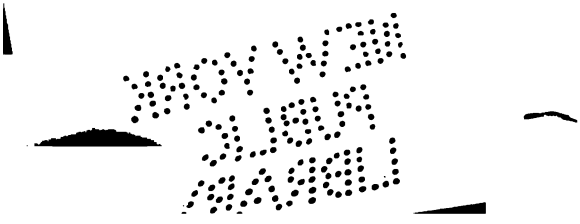

Dedication

My dear Kipling, — Both of us believe that there are higher aims in life than the weaving of stories well or ill, and according to our separate occasions strive to fulfil this faith.

Still, when we talked together of the plan of this tale, and when you read the written book, your judgment thereof was such as all of us hope for from an honest and instructed friend—generally in vain.

So, as you found interest in it, I offer it to you, in token of much I cannot write. But you will understand.—

Ever sincerely yours,

H. RIDER HAGGARD.

To Rudyard Kipling, Esq.

Ditchingham, *14th August, 1905.*

S & B JUL 1 1947

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS tale was written two years ago as the result of reflections which occurred to me among the Egyptian sands and the empty cells of long-departed anchorites.

Perhaps in printing it I should ask forgiveness for my deviation from the familiar, trodden pathway of adventure, since in the course of a literary experience extending now, I regret to say, over more than a quarter of a century, often I have seen that he who attempts to step off the line chalked out for him by custom or opinion is apt to be driven back with stones and shoutings. Indeed, there are some who seem to think it very improper that an author should seek, however rarely, to address himself to a new line of thought or group of readers. As he began so he must go on, they say. Yet I have ventured on the history of Rupert Ullershaw's great, and to all appearance successful Platonic experiment, chiefly because this problem interested me: Under the conditions in which fortune placed him in the East, was he right or wrong in clinging to an iron interpretation of a vow of his youth and to the strict letter of his Western Law? And was he bound to return to the English wife who had treated him so ill, as, in the end, he made up his mind to do? In

short, should or should not circumstances be allowed to alter moral cases?

The question is solved in one way in this book, but although she herself was a party to that solution, looking at the matter with Mea's eyes it seems capable of a different reading. Still, given a sufficiency of faith, I believe that set down here to be the true answer. Also, whatever its exact cause and nature, there must be something satisfying and noble in utter Renunciation for Conscience' sake, even when surrounding and popular judgment demands no such sacrifice. At least this is one view of Life, its aspirations and possibilities; that which wearies of its native soil, that which lifts its face toward the Stars.

Otherwise, why did those old anchorites wear the stone beds of their cells so thin? Why, in this fashion or in that, do their successors still wear them thin everywhere in the wide earth, especially in the wise and ancient East? I think the reply is Faith: that Faith which bore Rupert and Mea to what they held to be a glorious issue of their long probation—that Faith in personal survival and reunion, without the support of which in one form or another, faint and flickering as it may be, the happiness or even the continuance of our human world is so difficult to imagine.

H. R. H.

THE WAY OF THE SPIRIT

PROLOGUE

THE last pitiful shifts of shame, the last agonised doublings of despair when the net is about the head and the victor's trident at the throat—who can enjoy the story of such things as these? Yet because they rough-hewed the character of Rupert Ullershaw, because from his part in them he fashioned the steps whereby he climbed to that height of renunciation which was the only throne he ever knew, something of it must be told. A very little will suffice; the barest facts are all we need.

Upon a certain July evening, Lord and Lady Devene sat at dinner alone in a very fine room of a very fine house in Portland Place. They were a striking couple, the husband much older than the wife; indeed, he was fifty years of age, and she in the prime of womanhood. The face of Lord Devene, neutral tinted, almost colourless, was full of strength and of a certain sardonic ability. His small grey eyes, set beneath shaggy, overhanging eyebrows that were sandy-coloured like his straight hair, seemed to pierce to the heart of men and things, and his talk, when he had

anything to say upon a matter that moved him, was keen and uncompromising. It was a very bitter face, and his words were often very bitter words, which seems curious, as this man enjoyed good health, was rich, powerful, and set by birth and fortune far above the vast majority of other men.

Yet there were flies in his silver spoon of honey. For instance, he hated his wife, as from the first she hated him; for instance, he who greatly desired sons to carry on his wealth and line had no children; for instance, his sharp, acrimonious intellect had broken through all beliefs and overthrown all conventions, yet the ghost of dead belief still haunted him, and convention still shackled his hands and feet. For he could find no other rocks whereon to rest or cling as he was borne forward by the universal tide which at last rips over the rough edges of the world.

The woman, Clara, Lady Devene, was physically magnificent; tall, with a regal-looking head, richly coloured, ivory-skinned, perfectly developed in every part, except perhaps her brain: Good-natured, courageous after a fashion, well-meaning, affectionate, tenacious of what she had learned in youth, but impulsive and quite elementary in her tendencies and outlook; one who would have wished to live her own life and go her own way like an amiable, high-class savage, worshipping the sun and the stars, the thunder and the rain, principally because she could not understand them, and at times they frightened her. Such was Clara, Lady Devene. She was not imaginative, she lived in the present for the present. She never heard the roll of the wheels of Fate echoing, solemn and ceaseless, through the thin, fitful turmoil of our lives, like the boom of distant battle-guns that shape

the destinies of empires discerned through the bray of brass bands upon an esplanade.

No; Clara was not imaginative, although she had a heart, although, for example, from year to year she could grieve over the man whom once she had jilted or been forced to jilt (and who afterwards died of drink), in order to take her "chance in life" and marry Lord Devene whom she cordially disliked; whom she knew, moreover, to be self-seeking and cross-souled, as each in his or her degree were all his race from the first remembered Ullershaw down to himself and his collaterals. Ultimately, such primitive and unhappy women are apt to find some lover, especially if he reminds them of their first. Lady Devene had done so at any rate, and that lover, as it chanced, was scarcely more than a lad, her husband's heir and cousin, a well-meaning but hot-hearted youth, whom she had befooled with her flatteries and with her beauty, and now doted on in a fashion common enough under such circumstances. Moreover, she had been found out, as she was bound to be, and the thing had come to its inevitable issue. The birds were blind, and Lord Devene was no man to spread his nets in vain.

Lady Devene was not imaginative—it has been said. Yet when her husband, lifting a large glass of claret to his lips, suddenly let it fall, so that the red wine ran over the white table-cloth like new-shed blood upon snow, and the delicate glass was shattered, she shivered, she knew not why; perhaps because instinct told her that this was no accident, but a symbol of something which was to come. For once she heard the boom of those battle-guns of Fate above the braying of the brass band on her life's tawdry esplanade. There rose in

her mind, indeed, the words of an old song that she used to sing — for she had a beautiful voice, everything about her was beautiful—a melancholy old song, which began:

> "Broken is the bowl of life, spilled is its ruby wine;
> Behind us lie the sins of earth, before, the doom Divine!"

It was a great favourite with that unlucky dead lover of hers who had taken to drink, and whom she had jilted—before he took to drink. The memory disturbed her. She rose from the table, saying that she was going to her own sitting-room. Lord Devene answered that he would come too, and she stared at him, for he was not in the habit of visiting her apartments. In practice they had lived separate for years.

. . . . . .

Husband and wife stood face to face in that darkened room, for the lamps were not lit, and a cloud obscured the moon which till now had shone through the open windows.

The truth was out. She knew the worst, and it was very bad.

"Do you mean to murder me?" she asked, in a hoarse voice, for the deadly hate in the man's every word and movement suggested nothing less to her mind.

"No," he answered; "only to divorce you. I mean to be rid of you—at last. I mean to marry again. I wish to leave heirs behind me. Your young friend shall not have my wealth and title if I can help it."

"Divorce me? You? *You?*"

"You can prove nothing against me, Clara, and I shall deny everything, whereas I can prove all against you. This poor

lad will have to marry you. Really I am sorry for him, for what chance had he against you? I do not like to see one of my name made ridiculous, and it will ruin him."

"He shall not marry me," she answered fiercely. "I love him too well."

"You can settle that as you like between you. Go back to your reverend parent's house if you choose, and take to religion. You will be an ornament to any Deanery. Or if you do not choose—" and with a dim, expressive gesture, he waved his hand towards the countless lights of London that glimmered beneath them.

She thought a while, leaning on the back of a chair and breathing heavily. Then that elementary courage of hers flared up, and she said:

"George, you want to be free from me. You noticed the beginning of my folly and sent us abroad together; it was all another plot—I quite understand. Now, life is uncertain, and you have made mine very miserable. If anything should chance to happen to me—soon, would there be any scandal? I ask it, not for my own sake, but for that of my old father, and my sisters and their children."

"No," he replied slowly. "In that sad and improbable event there would be no scandal. Only foolish birds foul their own nests unless they are driven to it."

Again she was silent, then drew back from him and said:

"Thank you, I do not think there is anything to add. Go away, please."

"Clara," he answered, in his cold, deliberate voice, "you are worn out—naturally. Well, you want sleep, it will be a good friend to you to-night. But remember, that chloral

you are so fond of is dangerous stuff; take enough if you like, but not too much!"

"Yes," she replied heavily, "I know. I will take enough—but not too much."

For a moment there was deep silence between them in that dark room. Then suddenly the great moon appeared again above the clouds, revealing their living faces to each other for the last time. That of the woman was tragic and dreadful; already death seemed to stare from her wide eyes, and that of the man somewhat frightened, yet remorseless. He was not one of those who recoil from their Rubicon.

"Good-bye," he said quickly; "I am going down to Devene by the late train, but I shall be back in town to-morrow morning—to see my lawyer."

With a white and ghost-like arm she pointed first to the door, then through the window-place upwards towards the ominous, brooding sky, and spoke in a solemn whisper:

"George," she said, "you know that you are a hundred times worse than I, and whatever I am, you have made me, who first forced me to marry you because I was beautiful, and then when you wearied of me, treated me as you have done for years. God judge between us, for I say that as you have had no pity, so you shall find none. It is not I who speak to you from the brink of my grave, but something within me."

. . . . . .

It was morning, and Rupert Ullershaw stood at the door of the Portland Place house, whither he had come to call upon Lady Devene, to whom he brought a birthday gift which he had

saved for months to buy. He was a somewhat rugged-faced lad, with frank grey eyes; finely built also, broad-shouldered, long-armed, athletic, though in movement slow and deliberate. There was trouble in those eyes of his, who already had found out thus early in his youth that though "bread of deceit is sweet to a man, afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel." Also, he had other anxieties who was the only son and hope of his widowed mother, and of a father, Captain Ullershaw, Devene's relation, whose conduct had broken her heart and beggared her of the great fortune for which she had been married. Now Rupert, the son, had just passed out of Woolwich, where, when his feet fell into this bitter snare, he had been studying in the hope of making a career for himself in the army.

Presently the butler, a dark, melancholy-looking person, opened the door, and Rupert saw at once that the man was strangely disturbed; indeed, he looked as though he had been crying.

"Is Lady Devene in?" Rupert asked as a matter of form.

"In, sir, yes; she'll never go out no more, except once," answered the butler, speaking with a gulp in his throat. "Haven't you heard, sir, haven't you heard?" he went on wildly.

"Heard what?" gasped Rupert, catching at the door frame.

"Dead, Mr. Ullershaw, dead — accident — overdose of chloral they say! His lordship found her an hour ago, and the doctors have just left."

. . . . . .

Meanwhile, in the room above, Lord Devene stood alone, contemplating the still and awful beauty of the dead. Then rousing himself, he took the hearth-brush, and with it swept certain frail ashes of burnt paper down between the bars of the low grate so that they crumbled up and were no more seen.

"I never believed that she would dare to do it," he thought to himself. "After all, she had courage, and she was right, I am worse than she was—as she would judge. Well, I have won the game and am rid of her at last, and without scandal. So—let the dead bury their dead!"

. . . . . .

When Rupert, who had come up from Woolwich that morning, reached the little house in Regent's Park, which was his mother's home, he found a letter awaiting him. It had been posted late on the previous night, and was unsigned and undated, but in Clara's hand, being written on a plain sheet and enclosed, as a blind, in a conventional note asking him to luncheon. Its piteous, its terrible contents need not be described; suffice it to say that from them he learned all the truth. He read it twice, then had the wit to destroy it by fire. In that awful hour of shock and remorse the glamour and the madness departed from him, and he, who at heart was good enough, understood whither they had led his feet.

After this Rupert Ullershaw was very ill, so ill that he lay in bed a long time, wandered in his mind, and was like to die. But his powerful constitution carried his young body through the effects of a blow from which inwardly he never really quite recovered. In the end, when he was getting better, he told his mother everything. Mrs. Ullershaw was a strong, reserved

woman, with a broad, patient face and smooth, iron-grey hair; one who had endured much and through it kept her simple faith and trust in Providence—yes, even when she thought that the evil in her son's blood was mastering him, that evil from which no Ullershaw was altogether free, and that he was beginning to walk in the footsteps of his father and of that ill guide and tempter, his cousin, Lord Devene. She heard him out, her quiet eyes fixed upon his face that was altered almost into age by passion, illness and repentance—heard him without a word.

Then she made one of the great efforts of her life, and in the stress of her appeal even became eloquent. She told Rupert all she knew of those brilliant, erratic, unprincipled Ullershaws from whom he sprang, and counted before his eyes the harvest of Dead Sea apples that they had gathered. She showed him how great was his own wrong-doing, and how imminent the doom from which he had but just escaped—that doom which had destroyed the unhappy Clara after she was meshed in the Ullershaw net, and corrupted by their example and philosophy which put the pride of life and gratification of self above obedience to law human or Divine. She pointed out to him that he had received his warning, that he stood at the parting of the ways, that his happiness and welfare for all time depended upon the path he chose. She, who rarely spoke of herself, even appealed to him to remember his mother, who had endured so much at the hands of his family, and not to bring her grey hairs with sorrow to the grave; to live for work and not for pleasure; to shun the society of idle folk who can be happy in the midst of corruption, and who are rich in everything except good deeds.

"Set another ideal before your eyes, my son," she said, "that of renunciation, and learn that when you seem to renounce you really gain. Follow the way of the Spirit, not that of the Flesh. Conquer yourself and the weakness which comes of your blood, however hard that may be. Self-denial is not really difficult, and its fruits are beautiful; in them you will find peace. Life is not long, my boy, but remorse may be a perpetual agony. So live, then, that having obtained forgiveness for what you have done amiss, it may not be there to torment you when you come to die."

As it chanced, her words fell in a fruitful soil well prepared to receive them—a strong soil, also—one which could grow corn as well as weeds.

"Mother," Rupert answered simply, "I will. I swear to you that whatever it costs me I will," and stretching out his wasted arms he drew down her grey head and kissed her on the brow.

This history will show how he kept that sick-bed promise under circumstances when few would have blamed him for its breach. Romantic as Rupert Ullershaw's life was destined to be, thenceforward it was quite unstained.

CHAPTER I

THE VOICE OF THE SINGING SAND

MORE than eleven years have gone by, and the scene upon which our curtain rises again is different indeed to that upon which it fell. In place of that little London house where Rupert had lain sick, behold the mouth of a cliff-hewn temple, and on the face of it, cut from the solid rock, four colossal statues of an Egyptian king, nearly seventy feet high each of them, that gaze for ever across the waters of the Nile and the desert beyond — that unchanging desert whence for three thousand five hundred years, dawn by dawn, they have greeted the newly-risen sun. For this place is the temple of Abu-Simbel below the Second Cataract of the Nile in the Soudan.

It is afternoon in the month of September, of the year 1889, and beneath one of the colossi near to the entrance of the temple is seated a British officer in uniform—a big, bearded, rugged-faced man, with clear grey eyes, and an expression that at this moment, at any rate, would have impressed an observer as remarkable for intensity and power. Indeed, in this respect it was not unlike that stamped upon the stone countenances of the mighty statues above him. There was in it something of the same calm, patient strength—something of that air of contemptuous expectancy with which the old Egyptian sculptors had the art of clothing those effigies of their gods and kings.

It would have been hard to recognise in this man the lad whom we left recovering from a sore sickness, for some twelve years of work, thought, struggle, and self-control—chisels, all

of them, that cut deeply—had made their marks upon him. Yet it was Rupert Ullershaw and no other.

The history of that period of his life can be given in few words. He had entered the army and gone to India, and there done very well. Having been fortunate enough to be employed in two of our little frontier wars, attention had been called to his conspicuous professional abilities. As it chanced also he was a studious man, and the fact that he devoted himself but little to amusements—save to big-game shooting when it came in his way—left him plenty of time for study. A chance conversation with a friend who had travelled much in the East, and who pointed out to him how advantageous it might be for his future to have a knowledge of Arabic, with which very few English officers were acquainted at the time, caused him to turn his attention to that language. These labours of his becoming known to those in authority, the Indian Government appointed him upon some sudden need to a semi-diplomatic office on the Persian Gulf. Here he did well, and although he never got the full public credit of it, was fortunate enough to avert a serious trouble that might have grown to large proportions and involved a naval demonstration. In recognition of his services he was advanced in rank and made a C.B. at a very early age, with the result that, had he wished it, he might have entered on a diplomatic career with every hope of distinction.

But Rupert was, above all things, a soldier, so turning his back upon these pleasant prospects, he applied to be allowed to serve in Egypt, a request that was readily granted on account of his knowledge of Arabic. Here in one capacity or another he took part in various campaigns, being present at the battles of El-Teb and Tamai, in the latter of which he was wounded. Afterwards he marched with Sir Herbert Stewart from Dongola and fought with him at Abu Klea. Returning to Egypt after the death of Gordon, he was employed as an Intelligence officer at Cairo, and finally made a lieutenant-

colonel in the Egyptian army. In this capacity he accompanied General Grenfell up the Nile, and took part in the battle of Toski, where the Dervishes were routed on 3rd August, 1889. Then he was stationed at Abu-Simbel, a few miles away, to make arrangements as to the disposal of prisoners, and subsequently to carry on negotiations with certain Arab chiefs whose loyalty remained doubtful.

Such is a brief record of those years of the life of Rupert Ullershaw, with which, eventful as they were, our story has nothing to do. He had done exceedingly well; indeed, there were few officers of his standing who could look to the future with greater confidence, for although he appeared older than his years, he was still a young man; moreover, he was liked and respected by all who knew him, and notwithstanding his success, almost without enemies. It only remains to add that he had kept the promise which he made to his mother upon his sick-bed to the very letter. Ever since that sad first entanglement, Rupert's life had been spotless.

The sun was beginning to sink, and its rays made red pathways on the flooded Nile, and bathed the desert beyond with a tremulous, rosy light, in which isolated mountains, that in shape exactly resembled pyramids, stood up here and there like the monuments of kings. The scene was extraordinarily beautiful; silent also, for Rupert had pitched his camp, and that of his small escort, half a mile away further up the river. As he watched, the solemnities of the time and place sank into his heart, stilling the transient emotions of the moment, and tuning his mind until it was in key with its surroundings, an instrument open to the subtle influences of the past and future.

Here in the shadow of the mighty works of men who had been dead for a hundred generations, and looking out upon the river, the desert, and the mountains, which to them must have seemed as unutterably ancient as they did to him this day, his own absolute insignificance came home to Rupert

as perhaps it had never done before. He thought of his petty strivings for personal advancement, and a smile grew upon his face like the smile upon that of the god-king above him. Through the waste of all the weary ages, how many men, he wondered, even in this desolate spot, had brooded on the hope of such advantage, and gone forth, but few to triumph, the most to fail, and all of them to learn within some short years that failure and success are one when forgetfulness has covered them. Thus the warning of the past laid its heavy hand upon him and pressed his spirit down, and the sound of the Nile flowing on, flowing ever from the far-off mountains of its birth through the desert to the sea, murmured in his ear that like those of Job, his days were "swifter than a post," sung in his ear the song of Koholeth: Vanity of vanities: all is vanity.

Rupert grew sad as the shadow of the hills which gathered deep about him, empty and desolate of mind as the vast, deserted temple at whose mouth he sat, the fane of a faith that was more dead than were its worshippers. Then suddenly he remembered how that morning at the dawn he had seen those cups of shadow filled with overflowing light, and how by it on the walls of that very temple he had read prayers of faith and affirmations strangely certain, of the eternity of all good works and the resurrection of all good men, in which they who carved them five-and-thirty centuries before, believed as firmly as he believed to-day.

Now it was the future that spoke to him as his heart took hope once more. Oh! he knew full surely—it came upon him with a strange conviction—that though many troubles and much bitterness might await him, though he might be born to sorrows as the sparks fly upwards, yet he should not live uselessly, or endure death in vain, that no life, not even that of the ant which toiled ceaselessly at his side in the yellow sand, was devoid of purpose or barren of result; that chance and accident did not exist; that every riddle had its answer, and every pang its issue in some new birth; that of the cloth of

thoughts and deeds which he wove now would be fashioned the garment that he must wear hereafter.

Thus brooded Rupert Ullershaw after his fashion when alone, as indeed he loved to be, for he was a man who faced things and found truth oftenest in solitude.

Tired of these reflections, natural as they might be in such a time and spot, at length he rose, went a few paces to look at the lonely grave of a comrade whose working day was over, then with a sigh bethought him that now the afternoon was cooler, he would take some exercise before the darkness fell. Rupert loved all the sights and sounds of Nature, and remembering that the sunset would be fine seen from the top of a cliff behind him, he set to work to toil up the steep slope of sand, following a little track made by the jackals from the river-bank to their holes in the rocks, for he knew that these cunning animals would choose the easiest path.

Reaching the crest at length, he paused a while to look at the endless desert and the fiery ball of the sun sinking towards it so swiftly that he could almost see it move, as it does, or seems to do in Egypt. It was going down behind two distant, solitary mountains; indeed, for a few seconds, perhaps a minute, its great red globe seemed to rest upon the very point of one of these mountains. Contemplating it and them, he recalled a legend which an old Arab had told him, that beyond those mountains was a temple larger and finer than Abu-Simbel. He had asked how far it was away and why no one went there, and learned that it was a great distance off, deep in the desert, and that if anyone looked upon it he died, for it was the home of magicians who did not call on Allah and rejected his prophet. Therefore no one did look, only the legend remained, which, the Arab had added, without doubt was true.

Forgetting the tale of this fabled temple, Rupert pursued his walk past the graves of some of the Khalifa's emirs who had been wounded in the battle of Toski, a few miles away,

and when they succumbed, hastily buried where they died by their retreating comrades. He knew the man who lay beneath one of those rough piles of stones—a brave Dervish of high rank, who had very nearly put an end to himself and his earthly adventures. He could see the fellow coming at him now, yelling his war-cry and shaking his great spear. Luckily he had his revolver in his hand and was able to shoot before that spear fell. The bullet struck his enemy somewhere in the head, for he saw the blood appear and the man reel off from him as though he were drunk. Then he lost sight of him in the turmoil and slaughter, but afterwards was told that he died upon the retreat, and was shown his grave by a prisoner who had helped to bury him.

Whilst he was regarding it with the respect that one brave man has for another, even though that other be a cruel and fanatical heathen, Rupert became aware of a shadow falling upon him, which, from its long, ugly shape, he knew must be cast by a camel. Turning, he perceived a white dromedary bearing down upon him swiftly, its soft, sponge-like hoofs making so little noise upon the sand that he had never heard it coming. On the back of the camel sat an Arab sheik, who held three spears in his hand, one large and two small. Suspecting a sudden attack, as well might happen to him in that lonely place at the hands of a fanatic, he sprang back behind the grave and drew his pistol, whereon the man called out to him to put it up in the name of God as he came in peace, not war.

"Dismount," answered Rupert sternly, "and throw down your spears."

The Arab stopped his dromedary, commanded it to kneel, and slipping from the saddle, laid down the spears and bowed himself humbly.

"What are your name and business," asked Rupert, "and why do you come on me thus alone?"

"Bey," he answered, "I am Ibrahim, the Sheik of the

Land of the Sweet Wells out yonder. I came to your camp with my attendants, and being told that you were here upon the hill-top, followed to speak with you, if it pleases you to open your ears to me."

Rupert studied his visitor. He was a very handsome but cruel-looking man of about forty years of age, with flashing black eyes, a hooked nose, and a short, pointed beard which had begun to turn grey.

"I know you," he said. "You are a traitor to the Government of Egypt, from which you have taken many benefits. You received the Khalifa's General, Wad en-Negūmi, and supplied him with food, water, and camels. Had it not been for you, perhaps he could not have advanced, and had it not been for you, many more of his people must have been captured. How dare you show your face to me?"

"Bey," said the Sheik humbly, "that story is not true. What I did for Abdullahi's soldiers, I did because I must, or die. May his name be accursed!" and he spat upon the ground. "Now I come to seek justice from you, who have power here."

"Go on," said Rupert; "you shall have justice, I promise you—if I can give it."

"Bey, a detachment of the Egyptian troops mounted upon camels have swept down upon me and robbed me. They have taken away all my sheep and most of the dromedaries, and killed three of my people who strove to protect them. More, they have insulted my women—yes, they, those dogs of Fellaheen. In the name of Allah, I pray you order that my property should be restored, or if you cannot do so, write to Cairo on my behalf, for I am a true man, and the Khedive is my lord and no other."

"Yet," answered Rupert, "yet, Sheik Ibrahim, I have seen a certain letter written by you to the impostor, Abdullahi, the Khalifa, in which you offer him assistance, should he

invade Egypt and take the road that runs past the Sweet Wells."

Ibrahim's face fell. "That letter was forged," he said sullenly.

"Then, friend, how comes it that you know anything about it?" asked Rupert. "Get you back to your tribe and be thankful that, now the Khedive is victorious, his soldiers did not take you as well as your sheep. Know that you are a man with a mark against his name, and bear yourself more faithfully, lest this should be your lot"—and with his foot he touched the grave of the emir across which they talked.

The Sheik made no answer. Going to his dromedary, he climbed into the saddle, bade the beast rise, and rode off a little way. At a distance of about forty yards, which doubtless he judged to be out of revolver shot, he halted and began a furious tirade of abuse.

"Infidel dog!" he shouted, with some added insults directed against Rupert's forbears; "you who stand there with your defiling foot upon the grave of the true believer whom you killed, hear me. You refuse me justice and accuse me of having helped the Khalifa. Be careful lest I should help him, I who am the Sheik of the Territories of the Sweet Wells, the road whereby he will come to take Egypt with fifty thousand dervishes at his back, who will not be fool enough to march down the river-bank and be shelled by your guns from steamboats. My tribe is a strong one, and we live in a mountainous country whence we cannot be hunted, though your hounds of Fellaheen took us unawares the other day. Oh! be careful lest I should catch you, white Bey, whose face I shall not forget. If ever I do, I will pay you back for the affront you put upon me, a true man. I swear it by my father's head. Yes, then you shall choose between the faith and death; then you shall acknowledge that Mahomet is the prophet of Allah, you Cross-worshipping infidel, and that he whom you name an impostor shall drive you and all your foul race into the sea."

"You forget yourself, Sheik of the Sweet Wells," answered Rupert quietly, "and forget also that the future is the gift of God and not shaped by man. Begone, now! Begone at once, lest I, too, grow angry and summon my soldiers to take you and throw you in prison where you deserve to be. Off, and let me see your face no more, you who dare to threaten your sovereign, for I think that when we meet again it will be the herald of your death."

Ibrahim sat up upon his camel and opened his mouth to answer, but there was something in the stern, fateful bearing of the Englishman which seemed to quiet him. At any rate, he turned the beast and urging it to a trot, departed swiftly across the desert.

"A very dangerous man," reflected Rupert. "I will report the matter at once and have him looked after. I wish they had left his sheep alone and taken him, as no doubt he knows I said that they ought to do. Somehow, I don't feel as though I had seen the last of that fellow." Then dismissing the matter of this rebel sheik from his mind, he continued his walk and crossed the mountain plateau.

Presently Rupert came to the path by which he intended to descend. It was a strange one, none other indeed than a perfect waterfall of golden sand set at so steep an angle that the descent of it appeared dangerous, if not impossible, as would doubtless be the case had that slope been of rock. Being of sand, however, the feet of the traveller sink into it and so keep him from slipping. Then, if he is fortunate, for this thing does not always happen, he may enjoy a curious experience. As he moves transversely to and fro across the face of the slide, all about him the sand begins to flow like water, till at length it pours itself into the Nile below and is swept away. More, as it flows it sings, a very wild song, a moaning, melancholy noise that cannot be described on paper, which is caused, they say, by the vibration of the mountain rocks beneath the weight of the rolling sand. From time to time

Rupert paused in his descent and listened to this strange, thrilling sound until it died away altogether, when wearying of the amusement, he scrambled down the rest of the hill-side and reached the bank of the Nile.

Here his reflections were again broken in upon, this time by a woman. Indeed he had seen her as he descended, and knew her at once for the old gipsy who for the past year or two had lived in a hovel close by, and earned, or appeared to earn her living by cultivating a strip of land upon the borders of the Nile. As it chanced, Rupert had been able a month or so before to secure repayment to her of the value of her little crop which had been eaten up by the transport animals, and the restoration of her milch goats that the soldiers had seized. From that moment the old women had been his devoted friend, and often he would spend a pleasant hour in talking to her in her hut, or while she laboured in her garden.

To look at, Bakhita, for so she was named, was a curious person, quite distinct from the Egyptian and Soudanese women, being tall, thin, very light-coloured for an Eastern, with well-cut features and a bush of snow-white hair which hung down upon her shoulders. Indeed she was so different from themselves that she was known as the Gipsy by all the natives in the district, and consequently, of course, credited with various magical powers and much secret knowledge—with truth in the latter case.

Rupert greeted her in Arabic, which by now he spoke extraordinarily well, and held out his hand for her to shake. She took it, and bending down touched it with her lips.

"I was waiting for you, my father," she said.

"Supposing you call me 'your son,'" he answered, laughing, with a glance at her white locks.

"Oh!" she replied, "some of us have fathers that are not of the flesh. I am old, but perhaps your spirit is older than mine."

"All things are possible," said Rupert gravely. "But now, what is the business?"

"I fear I am too late with my business," she answered. "I came to warn you against the Sheik Ibrahim, who passed my hut a little while ago on his way to visit you at your camp. But you have already seen him, have you not?"

"Yes, Bakhita; but how do you know that?"

"Oh!" she replied evasively; "I heard his angry voice coming down the wind from the top of yonder hill. I think that he was threatening and cursing you."

Rupert nodded.

"I am sorry. I have known this man from childhood and his father before him, for he has done much hurt to my people, and would do more. That is why I live here; to watch him. He is a very evil man, cruel and full of the spirit of revenge. Also, it would have been well to speak him soft, for his tribe is strong and he may give trouble to the Government. It is true, as he says, that the soldiers did handle him with roughness, for one of them had grudges against him."

"What is said, is said," answered Rupert indifferently. "But tell me, mother, how do you come to know so much—about many things?"

"I? Oh! I sit by the river and listen, and the river tells me its tidings—tidings from the north, tidings from the south; the river tells me all. Although you white men cannot hear it, that old river has a voice for those whose ears are opened."

"And how about tidings from east and west where the river does not run?" asked Rupert, smiling.

"Tidings from the east and west? Oh! thence and thither blow the winds, and those whose eyes are opened, see more in them than dust. They have their voices too, those old, old winds, and they tell me tales of the kings of my people who are dead, and of the loves and wars of long ago."

Rupert laughed outright.

"You are a very clever woman, mother," he said; "but be

careful that they don't arrest you as a Mahdist spy, for you won't be able to call the Nile and the Campsine wind as witnesses."

"Ah! you laugh at me," she answered, shaking her old head; "but you wonderful white folk have still much to learn from the East that was grey with time when the first of your forefathers yet lay within the womb. I tell you, Rupert Bey, that all Nature has its voices, and that some of them speak of the past, some of the present, and some of the future. Yes; even that moving sand down which you climbed but now has its own voice."

"I know that well enough, for I heard it, but I can't explain to you the reason in Arabic."

"You heard it; yes, and you would tell me that it is caused by sand rubbing up against rocks, or by rocks singing to the sound of the sand like a harp to the wind, and so, without doubt, it is. You heard the voice, wise white father, but tell me, did you understand its talk? Listen!" she went on, without waiting for an answer. "I, seated here watching you as you climbed, I heard what the sand said about you and others with whom your life has to do. Oh, no; I am not a common fortune-teller. I do not look at hands and make squares in the dust, or throw bones and pebbles, or gaze into pools of ink. Yet sometimes when the voice speaks to me, then I know, and never so well as of him whose feet are set upon the Singing Sand."

"Indeed, mother; and what was its song of me?"

"I shall not tell you," she answered, shaking her head. "It is not lawful that I should tell you, and if I did, you would only set me down as a common cheat—of whom there are many."

"What had the song of the sand to say of me?" he repeated carelessly, for he was only half-listening to her talk.

"Much, Rupert Bey," she answered; "much that is sad and more that is noble."

"Noble! That should mean the peerage at least. Well, everything considered, it is a pretty safe prophecy," he muttered to himself, with a laugh, and turned to leave her, then checked himself and asked: "Tell me, Bakhita, what do you know of the lost temple in the desert yonder?"

Instantly she became very attentive, and answered him with another question:

"How can I know anything of it, if it is lost? But what do you know?"

"I, mother? Nothing; I am interested by the story and in old temples, that is all, and I was certain that a person who can interpret the voices of the river, the winds, and the sands, must know all about it."

"Well, perhaps I do," she answered coolly. "Perhaps I would tell you also to whom I am so grateful. Come to my hut and we will see."

"No," he said; "not to-night. I must go back to my camp; I have letters to write. Another time, Bakhita."

"Very well, another time, and afterwards perhaps we may visit that temple together. Who can say? But I think that you will have letters to read as well as to write this evening. Listen!" and she held up her hand and bent her head towards the river.

"I hear nothing except a jackal howling," he answered.

"Don't you? I hear the beat of a steamer's paddles. She will be moored by Abu-Simbel in just three hours."

"Nonsense!" said Rupert. "I don't expect her for a week."

"People often get what they don't expect," she answered. "Good-night, Rupert Bey! All the gods that ever were in Egypt have you in their keeping till we meet again."

Then she turned without more words, and by the light of the risen moon began to pick her way swiftly among the rocks fallen from the cliff face, that lay on the brink of the flooded Nile, till half a mile or so further north she passed

through the fence of her garden and came to her own mud hut.

Here Bakhita sat down on the ground by its door, and was very thoughtful whilst she awaited the coming of the steamer, of which either her own ears or perhaps some traveller had warned her. For Bakhita also expected a letter, or, at any rate, a message, and she was thinking of the writer or the sender.

"A mad whim," she said to herself. "Had not Tama wisdom enough of her own, which comes to her with her blood, that she needs must go to learn that of these white people, and to do so, leave her high place to mix even with the daughters of Fellaheen, and hide her beauty behind the yashmak of a worshipper of the false Prophet? Surely the god of our fathers must have struck her mad, and now she is in great danger at the hands of that dog Ibrahim. Yet, who knows? This madness may be true wisdom. Oh! there are things too high for me, nor can my skill read all her fate. So here at my post I bide to watch and learn as I was bidden."

CHAPTER II

TWO LETTERS

WHEN Rupert reached his camp beyond the great temple, he asked the sergeant of his guard whether the Sheik Ibrahim had been there with his servants. The soldier answered that he had seen no sheik.

"He must have been watching to find me alone; lucky I had my pistol with me," thought Rupert to himself.

Then he ate his dinner, and afterwards sat down and wrote a report of this and other matters to his superiors in Cairo. As he finished copying the paper, to his surprise he heard a steamer hoot, and next minute his orderly informed him that a boat coming up stream was making fast opposite to the temple.

"So old Bakhita was right, after all. What long ears she must have," thought Rupert, as he started to board the steamer.

She proved to be a Government boat from Assouan, carrying a company of Egyptian troops under the command of a brother-officer of his own, who brought him despatches and private letters. Though one of the latter was in the handwriting of his mother, from whom he was most anxious to hear, as no letter of hers had reached him for some time, it was characteristic of Rupert that he read the despatches first. Amongst other things, these contained an order that he should proceed at once to Cairo, there to advise with his chiefs on certain matters connected with the state of affairs in the Wady-Halfa district. They informed him also that the

officer who brought them would stay to carry on his work at Abu-Simbel.

As the boat was to start down Nile at dawn, Rupert spent most of the night in making arrangements with his successor, and in instructing him as to the political position. When this duty was finished, and the company of soldiers had been disembarked and camped, his own packing claimed attention, so that, in the end, he did not get aboard the steamer till nearly four o'clock in the morning—that is, about an hour before she cast off. Going at once to his cabin, Rupert opened his mother's envelope, to find that the letter within was written with pencil, and in a very shaky hand. Consumed by anxiety, he began to read. It ran as follows:—

"My Dearest Son,—My last letter to you was that which I wrote to say how thankful I was to hear that by God's mercy you had safely passed the great dangers of the battle of Toski, and the delight with which I saw you so favourably spoken of in the official despatches reporting the victory.

"That was five weeks ago, and I have not written since because, dear Rupert, I have been somewhat seriously ill and was not able to do so. Nor would I let anyone else write lest you should be frightened. One night, Rupert, whilst reading my Bible before going to bed, a very strange feeling suddenly came over me, and I remember no more for two days. When I recovered consciousness the doctor told me that I had had a stroke, I could not quite make out of what kind, nor does it matter. He added, not then but afterwards, that for a while my condition was precarious, and intimated to me that although all danger had passed for the present and I might live for years, this was without doubt a warning. Of course I understood what he meant and asked no more.

"My dearest boy, as you know, I do not fear death, especially if it should come in so merciful a form. But on the other hand, I do not wish to die without seeing you again. So, if it

is possible, and your career will not be greatly injured thereby, I write to ask you to come to England as soon as you can, for, Rupert, it is now well over eleven years since you left home, during all which time I have not seen your face except in dreams.

"I cannot write much, for my left arm is paralysed, and all that side of my body very stiff and helpless, which makes it difficult for me to sit up, so I am asking your cousin, Edith Bonnythorne, to tell you what news there is. One piece, however, I must mention, since a young woman might not like to speak of it in writing to a gentleman.

"There has been another of those sad disappointments in Lord Devene's family, the sixth, I think, since his re-marriage. This time the child, a boy, was born at seven months. Every possible effort was made to save his life; indeed I am told that the poor little thing was put into a kind of incubator, the latest invention, which is said to be very successful in such cases. But it was of no use, the child died. So, although I know you care nothing about it, you are once more his heir, and I think likely to remain so.

"Poor Lady Devene has been to see me. She is a good sort of woman, although very narrow in her religious views. I think she calls herself a Calvinist (fancy *his* marrying a Calvinist!). She grieves more over the fact that the child was not christened than because of its sad death. Indeed, speaking half in German and half in English, as is her way when moved, she said right out that she believed it died because Lord Devene would not have the ceremony performed lest it should catch a chill, and added that she was sure no child of theirs would ever live unless her husband abandoned his godless and free-thinking ways. Lastly, she declared that she wished she had never married him, but supposed that it was so ordained in punishment of her sins, the worst of which was that being dazzled by the prospect of so brilliant a match, she had accepted what he told her about his religious principles

without satisfying herself that he spoke the truth. I hear that there was a great quarrel between them as to this matter of the christening, in which she seems to have had the best of it, although he would not give way, for Tabitha (that is her name) is very stolid and strong-willed when she likes. At any rate, he lost his temper and became violent, saying he wished that either she or he were dead, to which she answered that *she* did not take chloral. I tell you all this because I think you ought to know. It is a sad story, and I cannot help believing that there is something in what poor Lady Devene says. Do try to come to see me, my dearest, dearest Rupert.—Your ever loving mother,

"MARY ULLERSHAW."

Rupert was deeply moved by the contents of this letter. His mother was the one being whom he really loved upon earth; and although of course he always contemplated such a possibility in a vague fashion, the fact that she might die at any moment, that she had indeed been very near to death, absolutely overwhelmed him. He had never taken any leave heretofore: first, because he shrank from returning to England and the inevitable meeting with Lord Devene, and secondly, for the reason that his career had moved forward so rapidly from point to point and from place to place, that at no given time had it been convenient so to do without the loss of some considerable opportunity.

Now he knew that in this matter he had been wrong and selfish, also that it might be too late to repair his fault. Rupert determined then and there that he would sail for home by the first steamer, even if he had to resign his commission in the Egyptian Army in order to do so. His mind made up on this point, he took up the second envelope directed in clear and fastidious-looking writing to Lieutenant-Colonel Ullershaw, C.B., D.S.O., etc., etc., Egyptian Army.

"Well, she has got it all in—just like Edith," he thought

to himself, as his eye fell upon this somewhat elaborate superscription. Then he opened and read the letter.

Like all that came from her—and he received several every year, since it seemed that Edith Bonnythorne did not wish her absent relative to forget her—it was long, well-balanced and worded, giving the idea that it had been carefully composed and perhaps copied. It began with warm congratulations to her dear Cousin Rupert upon his escape from harm in the battle of Toski, of which she said she had read the accounts with her heart in her mouth, and on the credit that he had won, which, she added, made her even prouder of him than she had been before.

Then it told him all the details of his mother's illness, whereof the issue, she said, had been awaited with the greatest anxiety, since, for a few hours, it was thought that she must die.

Next she passed on to general news, informing him that horse-racing, gambling debts and general extravagance had involved Dick Learmer, who was a cousin of both of them, in such difficulties that bankruptcy proceedings had been commenced against him. In the end, however, Lord Devene had come to the rescue and compounded with his creditors. Moreover, he had appointed him his private secretary, with good pay—for he earned nothing at the Bar—and as he was a capital speaker and popular, talked of putting him up to contest, in the Liberal interest, that division of the county in which the Devene estates were situated, as he disliked the sitting member, a Conservative, and wished to oust him.

"So," added Edith, "Dick has fallen on his feet again when it seemed all over with him. I confess that I am glad both for his own sake and because these family scandals are very disagreeable."

Lord Devene himself, she continued, was in a dreadful state of mind over the death of the baby boy. Indeed she

could never have believed that anything would have moved him so much. Also, his domestic relations appeared to be very unhappy, as he and his wife constantly quarrelled over religious questions. What was more, on the whole she had the best of it, since his gibes and sarcasms took not the slightest effect upon her and she seldom lost her temper. What would be the end of it Edith could not guess, but he was growing to look quite old and ill. The letter ended by imploring Rupert to come home to visit his mother, whom otherwise he might not see again, and to rest a little while after so many years of hard work. Further, it would, she was sure, be to his interest to make the acquaintance of the leading people in London, who were always ready to push on a successful man with good social and professional prospects if only they remembered that he existed.

Rupert laid this letter down by that from his mother and began to think, for he was too tired and excited with various emotions to be able to sleep.

He remembered the last time that he had seen Edith Bonnythorne and Dick Learmer. It was when he was lying ill after that terrible affair many years before. They were both of them second cousins of his own and of each other, being, like all the rest of the family, descendants by the male or female side of the old Ullershaw who had married a brewer's heiress, and accumulated the vast fortune that was now in the possession of Lord Devene. Edith was the daughter of a certain Mr. Bonnythorne, a High-Church clergyman, who went over to Rome, into a monastery indeed, and died there. The wife from whom he had separated some time before he took this step, it was said because of her friendship with her relative, Lord Devene, of whom Mr. Bonnythorne disapproved, was a woman of extraordinary beauty, charm, and wit, but she also had died long ago.

Dick Learmer, the next heir to the entailed Devene wealth after Rupert himself, though the title would not descend to

him under the special remainders of the original Patent, was the son of a Chancery barrister of Spanish extraction, whose family, the real name of which was Lerma, had been naturalised in England for some generations. This Mr. Learmer had died young, leaving his wife, another of the Ullershaws, and his son Richard well provided for, but no more. After her mother's death, Edith Bonnythorne, who had nothing, went to live with the widowed Mrs. Learmer, and thus it came about that she and Dick were brought up very much together. It was said, or so Rupert had heard, that the childless Lord Devene wished to take her into his own house, but that his first wife, Clara, refused to receive her, which was one of the causes of the estrangement between her and her husband.

Rupert could recall, with great distinctness, the appearance of Dick Learmer and Edith Bonnythorne as they had stood beside his bedside all those years ago. At that time Dick was in his twenty-second year. First he had intended to be a doctor, but after a while gave up medicine and began to eat his dinners for the Bar, to which profession he now belonged. He was then a dissipated and extravagant young man, but singularly handsome, and very popular among women. Perhaps they admired his fine dark and rather languid eyes, shaded by long lashes, his oval face and richly-coloured complexion, and his curling chestnut hair, all of which he had inherited with his Spanish blood. Or his somewhat sentimental yet passionate disposition, and the readiness of his address may have appealed to them. At any rate, they liked him, and his cousin, Edith Bonnythorne, then still a school-girl, was no exception to this rule, although even at that age she knew his faults and would lecture him upon them.

She had been a beautiful child, this Edith, with her tall figure and light, graceful carriage, so much so that people often turned to look at her; very regular features, delicately-arched eyebrows, a broad forehead, upon which the rippling hair of

reddish gold grew low; large dark blue eyes, somewhat heavy-lidded; a perfectly chiselled nose and mouth, with red lips that opened a little over the white teeth when she smiled; small feet and hands, tapering fingers and almond-shaped nails. Such was Edith's appearance as Rupert remembered her.

Well, he must go home; he must see all these people, which, with the exception of his mother, was the last thing that he wished to do. Their lives and his, which had diverged so widely, were about to cross again, so, continuing this line of thought, he set himself to recollect what he had heard of them of late years. After all, it was not much, for he had never made any inquiries.

Lord Devene's second wife, whom he married within ten months of Clara's death, was, he understood, a German of good family, who had filled the place of companion to a dowager lady of title. He had married her, so Rupert heard, on what he called scientific principles; in short, because German women were supposed to be models of the domestic virtues. But why she had married Lord Devene he had no idea, unless it were because he was Lord Devene. The results had not been quite satisfactory; indeed, as these letters showed, marriage on scientific principles had, in this case, proved a dismal failure.

Of course all this was much to his own temporal advantage, but the fact gave Rupert little joy; indeed, he would have been glad without reservation if his cousin Devene were at that moment the father of a flourishing family of sons. He did not want to succeed to the wealth and title, should he live to do so; he had no liking for this kind of inherited pomp which he had done nothing to earn, or for the life that it would involve. With the mysterious sixth sense, which most of us have in greater or less degree, he understood, indeed he was sure, that these honours and riches would bring him no happiness; moreover, for reasons that the reader can guess, he detested the very name of Devene. Still this was the present situation, and he could only hope that it might change.

For the rest, his cousin, the handsome, pleasure-loving, sensuous-natured, and unprincipled Dick Learmer, of whom Edith spoke in her letter, had so far closely followed the course which he would have predicted for him. On his mother's death he had come into his moderate fortune of about £1,000 a year, and dissipated it with graceful ease. Now he was hanger-on and head bottle-washer to Lord Devene, the worst fate, Rupert reflected, that could befall most men, and one that was in no way improved by the prospect of becoming a dummy member of Parliament; a puppet who must dance in whatever fashion pleased his patron and paymaster. Rupert remembered also that some years before he had heard talk of an engagement between Dick and their cousin Edith. If there was ever any truth in this rumour, evidently it had come to nothing. Probably there was some truth once, for he remembered that even when she was still a girl Dick always appeared to be attached to Edith, an affection which she seemed to reciprocate. Doubtless if this surmise were correct, she had shown her good sense by putting an end to the affair when she came to know the man's true character.

As for Edith herself, by an arrangement, of which he did not quite understand the details, but that seemed to be convenient to them both, financially and otherwise, for the last five years she had been living in his mother's house, whither she migrated on the death of Mrs. Learmer. Although in her letters to him his mother never wrote of her with enthusiasm, on the other hand, she never complained of her, unless it were a complaint to say that Edith seemed dissatisfied with her prospects and position in life, which, she added, was not wonderful when her great beauty and considerable talents were taken into account. How did it happen, Rupert wondered, that a person who was said to be so lovely, and, to judge from her photographs, with justice; so clever also, had reached her present age without marrying? Probably it

was because she had met nobody whom she cared about, and if so, this did credit to her heart, as the breaking off of her relations with Dick, if they ever existed, had done to her common-sense.

Well, doubtless he would soon find out all about these matters for himself, and—the steamer was starting. With a sigh Rupert put his letters into his pocket and went on deck. In the east the sun rose, a huge, golden ball, and its straight, powerful rays struck full on the colossi seated above the door of Abu-Simbel, and penetrated in spears of light far into the temple's mysterious and pillared depths. As they smiled on him when first he saw them, so those solemn, stony giants smiled on him in farewell. He wondered whether he would ever look on them again, these hoary monuments that had stared their adieux to so many generations of Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Saracens, and Christian men. He did not know, and yet again that sixth sense told him that he would. So did old Bakhita, for when a few minutes afterwards they steamed past her hut, she stood upon the bank and called to him :

"Farewell, Rupert Bey ! farewell for a little while—till you come once more ! "

He waved his hand and watched her tall figure until a bend of the river hid it, then, feeling drowsy at last, Rupert went into his cabin and lay down to sleep.

CHAPTER III

THE RETURN OF RUPERT

On one very dreary day in late September, Rupert, after an absence of nearly twelve years, again set foot on English soil. His ship was due at Plymouth early in the morning, and, as at about ten o'clock on the previous night he had been engaged in watching the Ushant light blinking fiercely upon the horizon until at last it went out like a dying lamp, he expected to land there by nine o'clock at the latest. But although the night seemed clear enough as he smoked his pipe before turning in and counted the lamps, green and red, of the many vessels bearing down this ocean highway to make Ushant, and passing some of them, within a few hundred yards of the liner; afterwards in the mouth of the Channel the fog came down.

Like most old travellers on the sea, at the change of speed of the engines he awoke instantly. Then the syren began its melancholy hooting, repeated at intervals of two minutes. Rising, Rupert looked through his open port-hole to find that they had run into a bank of dense fog through which they must pass dead-slow for hours, screaming their apprehensions into the white and woolly gloom, whence from time to time they were answered by other vessels as frightened as themselves.

Although the sun showed through it like a yellow Chinese lantern, not till ten o'clock in the morning did that mist lift, with the result that it was four in the afternoon when they dropped anchor in Plymouth harbour.

Two and a half more hours were taken up in transhipping

baggage, silver bullion, and passengers to the tug, and in passing the Customs, so that the special train did not steam out of Plymouth Station until after sunset. Rupert, a person quite regardless of appearances, and one to whom money was valuable, took a second-class ticket, and, as a result, found that he had a carriage to himself. Here, in the south of England, the evening was mild, and letting down the window he looked out. A soft, fast-falling rain gave to the autumn ruin of the landscape a stamp of peculiar sadness. Melancholy cattle stood at the gates of sodden fields, leaves fell from the trees beneath puffs of wind, women under umbrellas hurried to their cottage homes, and, unlighted as yet by lamps, unwarmed by the glow of fires, the grey stone farmsteads appeared deserted. To one accustomed for years to the sun of the East, and to its solemn, starry nights, the scene seemed desolate indeed, and its gloom sank deep into Rupert's heart.

He wished that he had not come to England. He wondered what awaited him there, and whether his mother were alive or dead. It might well chance that the latter was the case, for since the letter which he received at Abu-Simbel, he had no tidings of her, and although he had telegraphed his arrival from the steamer, of course there was no time for him to receive an answer. He had hoped, indeed, for news at Plymouth, and had stood twenty minutes waiting his turn at the purser's window, only to be told that there were no letters or telegrams for him.

At first Rupert was alarmed, then remembered that as he had neglected to wire the name of his ship from Port Said, he could scarcely expect to hear from his mother on board of her. Therefore, the absence of them meant nothing. And yet he was frightened, he knew not of what, much more frightened than ever he had been at the beginning of a battle, or when entering on any other risky enterprise. Danger, real danger, seemed to be nearer to him.

At Exeter Rupert bought some evening papers, the first he

had seen for years, and in reading them forgot his indefinite anxieties. So the time went by somehow till at length, stretched out endlessly around him, he saw the lights of the squalid suburbs of London whereof they do but seem to accentuate the dreary sameness; a whole firmament of fallen stars relieved here and there by the tawdry constellation of a gin-house.

Paddington at last! Into the great, empty station runs the double-engined train. Still although it is half-past eleven at night a number of people are standing upon one of the platforms, that at which it halts. These are friends and relations who have come to greet sundry of the passengers on their return to England. There, for instance, is a young wife, who, catching sight of her husband's face, runs along by the carriage door heedless of the remonstrances of the porters with whom she collides violently, until it comes to a standstill. Then in an instant that long-divided pair are in each other's arms again, and Rupert turns his head away so as not to spy upon their happiness, muttering to himself: "Lucky fellow, who has someone to care for him," and descends on to the platform, looking for a porter to help him with his hand baggage. As it chances he has to wait a while, since all the men available have gone to the aid of the first-class passengers, leaving the few "seconds" to look after themselves.

While Rupert stood thus patiently he became aware of a tall lady wearing a long cloak who was searching the faces of the crowd. Disappointed she began to walk past him towards another group by a saloon carriage further down the train, and their eyes met.

"Surely," he said, starting and lifting his hat, "you must be my cousin Edith grown up."

"Oh, Rupert, there you are!" she exclaimed, in a low, pleasant voice and holding out her slender hand. "Yes, of course it is I, grown up, and old too."

"One moment," he interrupted, for her dark cloak and hat

suggested to him that she might have come to break bad tidings. "Tell me how—what is the news of my mother?"

"She is much better and sends her love, but of course could not come to meet you."

The anxiety left Rupert's face.

"Thank God!" he said, with a sigh of relief. "Ah! here's a porter, now let us see about the luggage."

"I could not find you anywhere, although you are so big," said Edith, as having secured a four-wheeled cab they followed the man to one of the vans. "Where did you hide yourself, Rupert? I thought that you were not in the train at all."

"Nowhere. I stood for nearly five minutes by those second-class carriages."

"Oh! I never looked there; I did not think—" and she checked herself.

"Hi! that's one of mine," exclaimed Rupert, pointing to a battered tin case with Lieutenant R. Ullershaw, R.A., painted on it.

"I remember that box," said Edith. "I can see it now standing in the hall of your house with the name in beautiful, fresh, white letters. I came to say good-bye to you, but you were out."

"You are very observant!" he said, looking at her with curiosity. "Well, it has seen some wear since then—like its owner."

"Yes," she said demurely; "only the difference is that the wear has much improved *you*," and she glanced at the tall, soldier-like form before her with admiration in her eyes.

"Don't pay me compliments," Rupert replied, colouring. "I am not accustomed to them; and if you do, I shall be obliged to return them with interest."

"You can't," Edith answered merrily. "There is nothing of me to be seen in this cloak."

"Except your face, which is beautiful enough," he blurted out, whereat it was her turn to colour.

"There," he went on awkwardly, as at length the cab started, piled up with luggage. "It was awfully kind of you to come to meet me, all alone too, and so late. I never expected it, and I am most grateful."

"Why, Rupert, how can you suppose that I should do anything else? Unless I had broken my leg or something, I should have been there if it had been three in the morning. It's the greatest pleasure I have had for a long while, and, Rupert, I—I mean we—are all *so* proud of you."

"Oh, please don't, Edith," he broke in. "I have done nothing more than my duty, not very well always, and have been rewarded much above my merits, while many better men were overlooked—perhaps because I am supposed to have prospects. Say no more about it or we shall quarrel."

"Then I won't. I don't want to quarrel, I want to be friends with you, for I haven't many. But you mustn't be angry if I can't help feeling proud all the same that one among the lot of us has at last done something worth the doing, instead of wasting his time and strength and money in every sort of horrid dissipation, like horse-racing and gambling."

Rupert muttered something about such occupations always leading to trouble.

"Yes, indeed," she answered; "and you mustn't think me a prig for speaking like that, for I am not good myself a bit. I wish I were. But we had such a lesson lately, with that wretched Dick with whom I was brought up like a sister, you know, and scandals in the paper, and all that sort of thing, that I can't help feeling rather bitter, and glad that there is one of us whose name appears in the papers in another way."

As she spoke the light of a passing carriage-lamp fell full upon her earnest face and wide blue eyes, and Rupert understood how pure and beautiful they were.

Certainly had she so designed it, Edith could have found

no better way and opportunity of making an excellent first impression upon the somewhat simple mind of her cousin Rupert.

At length the growler lumbered up to the well-remembered door of the little house in Regent's Park that he had left so many years ago.

"Go in, Rupert, go at once," said Edith. "Your dear mother is wild to see you. I'll pay the cab."

He hesitated a little, then muttering that it was very good of her, gave way, and ran rather than walked up the steps and through the door which the servant had opened at the sound of wheels, up the stairs also, to the drawing-room on the first floor. And here at last, seated in an invalid-chair, her stiff arms outstretched to clasp him, and words of joy and blessing upon her pale lips, he found the beloved mother whom he had not seen for so many years.

"Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen—" she murmured presently, and broke off, for her tears choked her.

Rupert rose from his knees by her side, and turning his head away, said in a gruff voice that he must go to see about the luggage. So down he went to find Edith and the two servants struggling madly with his things which the grumpy cabman had refused to bring in.

"Leave go, Edith," he said angrily. "How can you? Why did you not call me?"

"Because I wouldn't interrupt you," she gasped, "but oh, Rupert, do you pack your boxes full of lead, or are all your savings in them?"

"No," he answered; "only a couple of stone steles and a large bronze Osiris—an Egyptian god, I mean. Go away, you girls, I will see about them to-morrow; my night things are in the bag."

They went readily enough, who desired no further acquaintance with the Colonel's boxes, one down to the kitchen, the other upstairs with the bag, leaving Rupert and Edith alone.

"Imagine," she said—"imagine a man who travels about with Egyptian gods in his portmanteau instead of clothes! Well, Rupert, I have sacrificed my best gloves on the altar of your gods," and she held up her hand and showed the kid split right across.

"I'll give you another pair," he ejaculated, still covered with confusion, as they passed together into the dining-room where his supper was waiting.

"Dear me," said Edith, "this unwonted exercise has made me very hot," and she threw off first her long cloak, and then her hat, and stood before him in the lamplight.

Oh, she was beautiful, beautiful! or so thought this dweller in deserts, whose heart and mind were soft as wax with joy and thankfulness, and who for years had scarcely spoken to English ladies.

Certainly the promise of Edith's youth had been fulfilled. The perfect shape, so light and graceful, and yet so tall, the waving hair of rich gold that gleamed like a crown upon her white brow, the large, deep blue eyes, the fine-cut features, redeemed from pride by the rounded cheeks and chin; the gliding, measured movements; all these graces remarkable enough separately, when considered as a whole, made of Edith a most attractive and gracious, if not an absolutely lovely woman. Then and there her charm went home to him; although as yet he did not know it, then and there Rupert fell in love with her, he who had never thought of any woman in such a sense since boyhood, and what is more, his transparent eyes told her the story.

For a few seconds they stood looking at each other; then she said:

"Would you like to speak to your mother for a few minutes while the cook sends up the soup? Oh, you must eat it, or she will be so disappointed, and so shall I, for we have been making it all the afternoon."

So he went. As the door closed behind him Edith sank

into a chair like a person who is suddenly relieved from some mental strain, and her face became very thoughtful.

"That is over," she said to herself, "and far better than I expected. He does not care for anybody, I am sure, and—the question is—do I like him? I don't think so, although he is handsome in his way, and a man. There is still a wall between us as in childhood—we are different. No, I don't think that I care for him," and she shivered a little. "Also there is that wretched Dick to be considered now as always. Oh, Dick, Dick! if I don't take this chance it is the third I shall have thrown away for you. You worthless Dick, who are yet the only man who does not make me shiver. But I am not sure. He is good; he is distinguished; he will almost certainly be Lord Devene, and beggars can't be choosers. Well, there is plenty of time to think, and meanwhile I will try to make him thoroughly in love with me before he meets other women."

Then the door opened, and the maid came in with the soup.

Such was the home-coming of Rupert Ullershaw.

CHAPTER IV

A BUSINESS CONVERSATION

EDITH, who was not an early riser, breakfasted in her own room. At half-past nine on the morning following Rupert's arrival the maid as usual brought up her tray, a newspaper—the *Morning Post*—and three letters. Two of these were of a sort with which she was very familiar, unpaid millinery bills, but the third was addressed in Lord Devene's unmistakable handwriting, that was of as hard and uncompromising an appearance as his own face. Throwing aside the bills with a shrug of her rounded shoulders, she opened her noble relative's epistle. It was brief and to the point:

"DEAR EDITH,—Come round after breakfast if you can. I shall be in till 10.45, and wish to speak to you.—Yours,

"DEVENE."

"Bother!" she said, as she laid it down. "I shall have to scurry through my dressing and take a cab. Well, he must pay for it. I wonder what he wants."

Lord Devene now lived at Grosvenor Square. Even in the minds of the most progressive latter-day agnostics primeval superstitions are apt to linger. Perhaps it was some sentiment of the sort which causes an African savage to burn the hut where a death has occurred and build himself a new one, that induced Lord Devene to sell the Portland Place house after the tragic decease of his first wife, at far below its value, and

buy himself another, though it is fair to add that the reason he gave for the transaction was the state of the domestic drains. However this may have been, Lady Devene Number Two never slept in the haunted chamber of Lady Devene Number One.

At 10.46 precisely Edith paid off her cab at the spacious steps of the Grosvenor Square mansion.

"Is Lord Devene in?" she asked of the butler, the same quiet, dark individual who had filled the office years ago in Portland Place.

"Yes, Miss Bonnythorne," he answered respectfully; "but I was just brushing his hat," and he glanced doubtfully at the clock.

"Show me in, Talbot; he wishes to see me," she said, and Talbot bowed in acquiescence.

Although no orders had been given to that effect, it was understood in this establishment that what Miss Bonnythorne desired was to be done.

A few seconds later she was ushered into the long library behind the dining-room, at the end of which Lord Devene was engaged in stamping a letter on a beautiful buhl writing-table near the window.

"Ah! my dear Edith," he said, in his hard, clear voice, as she glided slowly towards him, "you are only just in time. Another half-minute and I should have been gone."

"Half a minute is as good as a century," she answered. "Lots of things can happen in half a minute, Cousin George. One might die in it, for instance."

"Yes," he replied, "or be born, which is worse, or commit a murder, or engage oneself to be married, or as you justly remark, do lots of things. Life is made up of half-minutes, isn't it—most of them very bad ones," and he looked at her and smiled that peculiar smile of his which never seemed to get away from the region of his mouth. Pleasant-natured people generally smile with their eyes, others of a different

character from their lips alone, like a dog, which is apt to give a sarcastic air to that variable and modified expression of inward satisfaction.

Lord Devene had changed a good deal since last we met him. Then he was sandy-coloured, now he had become grey; indeed his peaked beard was quite white. The wrinkles upon his face also had deepened very much, and even in that not over-lighted room black crow's-feet were visible beneath his quick, restless eyes. Advancing age had laid its hand upon him although he was barely sixty-three. Also, he had lost something of his old defiant air; his iron will and resolution seemed to have weakened beneath the attacks of circumstance. He hesitated sometimes and looked at the other side of an argument; he was less sure of his deduced facts, less resolute in their application to his private affairs.

"You look tired," said Edith, as he came forward and kissed her cool, pink cheek.

"Tired!" he exclaimed, with something like a groan and sinking into a chair. "Would you not be tired if you had scarcely closed your eyes for three nights? Edith, I can't sleep, and I don't know what is to be the end of it, I don't indeed."

She threw an anxious glance at him, for these two, notwithstanding the difference of their age and sex, were bound together by strong ties of sympathy, and she was really grieved that he should be ill.

"I am so sorry," she said, in a gentle voice. "Insomnia is a terrible nuisance, but don't trouble yourself too much about it, the fit will pass off."

"Yes," he answered grimly, "it will pass off, because I shall take drugs this evening. I always do the fourth night, though I hate them."

"Those stuffs sometimes lead to accidents, Cousin George," replied Edith, pretending to be absorbed in tracing the flowers of the carpet with the point of her umbrella, but

really watching his weary face from beneath her long eyelashes.

"Yes, they sometimes lead to accidents," he repeated after her, "as I have good reason to know. But after all, accidents are not always undesirable. I daresay that life still seems a very pleasant thing to you, Edith, yet others may think differently."

"You ought not to, Cousin George, with your position and wealth."

"I am old enough to know, Edith, that position and wealth, which you rate so highly, do not necessarily spell happiness, or even content. After all, what am I? A rich peer at whose name old women and clergymen turn up their eyes, they don't quite know why, and whom men are afraid of because I can say sharp things—just one of the very common crowd of rich peers, no more. Then for my private life. Nothing interests me now; like the Roman Emperor I can't find a new excitement, even horse-racing and high stakes bore me. And at home, you know what it is. Well, I am not the first man who has bought a cow and found that she can butt—and bellow."

Edith smiled, for the vigour of the allusion tickled her.

"You know my one hope," he went on, almost with passion, "or if you don't, you are old enough and have brains enough to understand. I wanted sons sprung from a quiet, solid stock, sons who could make some good use of all this trash of titles and of riches which it is too late for me to do myself; men who would bear an honourable name and do honourable deeds, not fritter away their youth in pleasures as I did, or in what I took for pleasures, their manhood in the pursuit of idle philosophies that lead nowhere, and the accumulation of useless cash, and their old age in regrets and apprehensions. I wanted sons, it was my one ambition, but—" and he waved his hand through the empty air—"where are my sons?"

Now Edith knew Lord Devene to be a hard man where his

interests were concerned, wicked even, as the word is generally understood, as for instance, Mrs. Ullershaw would understand it. Thus he would gibe at morality and all established ideas, and of every form of religion make an open mock. Yet at this moment there was something so pathetic, so tragic even, about his aspect and attitude, that her heart, none of the softest, ached for him. It was evident to her that his cold, calculated system of life had utterly broken down, that he was exceedingly unhappy—in fact, a complete failure; that although, as he had so often demonstrated, there exists nothing in the world beyond the outward and visible, of which our brain and bodies are a part, yet strong as he was that nothing had been too much for him. He was conquered by a shadow, and in its effects at least that shadow seemed very like the real and solid thing which some folk call Fate, and others the Hand of God. The idea disturbed Edith, it was unpleasant, as sickness and the thought of death are unpleasant. Therefore, after the fashion of her nature, she fled from it, and to turn the subject put the first question that came into her mind:

"How is Tabitha to-day?"

Instantly all pathos, with the touch of dignity that was bred of it, left him and he began to sneer.

"Thank you; that noble and exalted haus-frau appears to be very well. Having paid her morning visit to the kitchen and scolded the cook for extravagance until, I regret to say, she gave notice, she is now seated in her dressing-gown reading a holy German work upon predestination, from which she has been so good as to translate to me some passages that appeared to her to bear directly upon my spiritual future. But I didn't send for you to talk about my wife and her grotesque views. Rupert Ullershaw is back, is he not?"

She nodded.

"Tell me about him. What is he like?"

"Tall, strong, handsome in a kind of way, except for his untidy hair and the lines upon his brow, which made him look

as though he had been trying to solve an acrostic for ten years, old looking for his age, awkward in his manner and slow of speech."

"A good portrait," he said approvingly, "of the outside. Now for the in."

Edith rubbed her forehead, as was her manner when deliberating.

"That's hard," she answered; "for how can one describe what one doesn't understand? But I'll try just to get him into my mind as I see him. I think—well, I think that he is very much the sort of man you said just now you would like your sons to be, if you had any."

Lord Devene started as though something had pricked him.

"I beg pardon," Edith added hurriedly. "I mean that he is thoroughly industrious, conscientious, religious, and all the other good 'ouses.' Would you believe it? After he had gone to bed last night, he came downstairs in an old ulster and undid a great box with a rope round it in order to get a Bible out. I heard the noise, and thinking one of the servants must be ill, or something, went to see what was the matter. There at 2.30 a.m. I met him on the stairs in that costume, and a queer couple we must have looked. I asked him what on earth he was doing with the luggage. Thereon he calmly explained that by mistake he put his Bible into the trunk he had in his cabin, and that as he did not like to disturb me to borrow one at that time of night he had to go to find it, and he showed me a large, frayed book which had been rebound, by himself he remarked, with a deer's skin. He added gravely that it was his custom always to read a portion of the Scriptures —that's what he said—before going to bed, that he hadn't missed doing so for years and wasn't going to now. I answered that was what I called true religion, and we parted. I didn't tell him how glad I was that he hadn't knocked me up and asked for a Bible, for upon my word, I don't know where I should have found one."

Lord Devene laughed heartily, for Edith's description of the scene tickled his sense of humour.

"Why," he said, "he ought to have married Tabitha," "there would have been a pair of them. I expect they will get on capitally together, as—" and he checked himself, then added: "What an uncommonly queer fish he must be, though he wasn't always such a model youth. Well, whether because of the Bible or in spite of it, Master Rupert has done very well. He is a man with a career before him; there is no doubt of that—a career, and in all probability," and he sighed, "other things, for no one can do without sleep for ever."

She nodded her head again, but said nothing, seeing that there was more to come.

"Is this military saint married by any chance?" he asked.

"Oh, no! certainly not."

"Or engaged?"

"Not in the least, I imagine. I should say that he has scarcely spoken to a woman for years. He seems so—so—"

"Is innocent the word you were looking for? Well, so much the better. Look here, Edith, you've got to marry him."

She made a droll little face and answered:

"This is very sudden—isn't that the right thing to say? But might I ask why?"

"For two reasons. Because it is to your interest, and, a better one still, because I wish it."

"Let me see," said Edith. "What are you and I to each other? Second cousins once removed, I think?"

"Yes; second cousins once removed, and more—friends," he answered, with slow emphasis.

"Well, has a second cousin once removed and a friend the right to tell a woman whom she must marry?"

"Certainly, under the circumstances. This fellow will probably be my heir; I must face that fact, for Tabitha will scarcely get over those habits of hers now—at any rate,

the doctors don't think so. So I wish him to marry someone for whom I have affection, especially as I expect that notwithstanding his religious tomfooleries, etc., he is the sort of man who makes a good husband."

"And supposing the doctors are wrong about Tabitha?" asked Edith calmly, for these two did not shrink from plain speaking.

"If so, you must still be provided for, and, my dear Edith, allow me to remark that you are not quite a chicken, and, for some cause or other, have not provided for yourself so far."

"I don't think I should live in any great luxury on Rupert's pay," she suggested, "even if he were willing to share it with me."

"Perhaps not; but on the day of your wedding with him I pay to the account of your trustees £25,000, and there may be more, whatever happens—when I get to sleep at last."

"That is very kind and generous of you, Cousin George," she answered, with sincerity, "and I'm sure I don't know why you should do it—for a second cousin once removed. But why on my wedding-day with Rupert particularly?"

"I have told you, because I wish it, and why not with him? Do you dislike the man?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have not fallen in love; I am not given that way."

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"No," he answered, "because you have always been 'in love,' as you call it, with that rascal Dick. Now, don't trouble to fence with me, for I know. Dick can be communicative at times—after dinner."

Edith did not try to fence, only she said, with some bitterness and colouring a little:

"Then that's the worst thing I have heard about him yet, which is saying a good deal."

"Yes; never trust a man who brags of his conquests. Listen, Edith! I help Dick because he amuses me, and is

useful. That's why I am going to make him a member of Parliament. Now I can't prevent your marrying him, if you like, and are fool enough, which to me is inconceivable. But if you do, out goes Dick, and there will be no £25,000 paid to your trustees."

"That's rather hard, isn't it, Cousin George?"

"No; it is merciful. Edith, I will not allow you to marry that worthless, unstable scamp of a fellow if I can help it, and for your own sake, because I am fond of you."

"I never said I wanted to marry him."

"No; but because of him you don't want to marry anybody else, which comes to much the same thing, so far as your future is concerned."

She thought a little while, rubbing her forehead as before, then replied:

"Well, all this is very clear and outspoken, but I suppose that you don't expect an answer at once. Remember that Rupert himself may have views. He is quite the sort of man who will not marry at all, on principle. Also, you only have my account to go on, you have not seen him yet since he was a boy. When you have, you may cease to think this proposed —arrangement—desirable."

"Quite true," he answered. "You have a very logical mind. Bring him to dinner here to-night, and we will talk the matter over again in a few days' time."

Edith rose to go, but he stopped her.

"How is your banking account?" he asked.

"For all practical purposes I believe it has ceased to exist," she answered gravely, for the matter was one which really troubled her.

He smiled, and taking his book from a drawer, filled in a cheque.

"There," he said; "that may help to keep the wolf from the door for a little while, and I daresay you want some dresses."

Edith looked at the cheque; it was for £250.

"You really are very kind to me," she said, "and whoever may dislike you, I don't. I love you."

"Me or the money?" he asked, lifting his eyebrows.

"You, you," she answered, then kissed him and went away.

"I think," reflected Lord Devene to himself, as the door closed behind her, "this is almost the first time for over twenty years I ever heard anybody say that to me who meant it. She must marry Rupert; it is her great chance in life, and hasn't she as much right to these good things as that pious bear."

CHAPTER V

THE DINNER-PARTY

WHEN Edith reached home it was to find that Rupert had been engaged all the morning in unpacking his baggage. Now he had just set up the two steles, which, it may be explained for the benefit of the uninitiated, are sepulchral tablets whereon the old Egyptians inscribed the records of their lives, or sometimes prayers. They were massive articles, as Edith had discovered on the previous night, most suitable to their original purpose in a tomb, but somewhat out of place in a very small London drawing-room, perched respectively on a piano and the top-shelf of a Chippendale bookcase.

"Don't they look well, mother?" he was saying.

"Yes, dear, yes," answered Mrs. Ullershaw doubtfully; "but perhaps a little solid and time-worn."

"Time-worn! I should think they are," he answered. "One of them is about four, and the other three thousand years old, but the more recent—no, not that of the man and his wife seated side by side—the other, is much the more valuable. It comes from Tel-el-Amarna, which, as of course you know, was the city built by the heretic king, Khuen-Aten, and was put up in the tomb of one of the royal princesses. Look at her picture on the top, with the globe of the sun above, and from it the rays ending in hands all stretched out in blessing over her. I'll translate it to you, if you like."

At this moment there was a most ominous crack, whereon Edith, who had entered unobserved, remarked mildly:

"If I were you, Rupert, I should put it on the floor first, for that— Ah! I thought so!"

As she spoke, the poor top-shelf buckled and broke, and down came the monument with a crash. Rupert sprang at it, dumb with fear, lifting it in his strong arms as though it were a toy.

"Thank Heaven!" he ejaculated, "it isn't injured."

"No," said Edith; "but the bookcase is."

Then he set to work to find another place for it, this time, at his mother's suggestion, on the ground. There remained, however, the Osiris, a really magnificent bronze, between two and three feet in height, which could not possibly be accommodated.

"I know," said Rupert, and shouldering the god, he marched it off downstairs.

"Do you think, Cousin Mary," asked Edith, as she watched him depart with this relic of the past, "that Rupert could be persuaded to remove those two shabby tombstones also?"

Mrs. Ullershaw shook her head.

"No. Please don't mention it, dear. He has set his heart on having them here, and says he has been thinking how nice they would look in this room for years. Besides, he would only take them into the dining-room."

"Then let them stay," answered Edith decidedly. "I can't eat my dinner before those memorials of the dead. I suppose he has not brought a mummy too."

"It seems that he had one, dear, but was obliged to leave it behind, because they would not have it on board the ship unless he would pay for it at what he calls 'corpse-rate.'"

"There is always something to be thankful for," said Edith, as she went to take off her hat.

When, however, she came down to luncheon, and found the great bronze Osiris standing among the plates on the side-board, her sense of gratitude was lessened, but as Rupert was delighted with the effect, she made no comment.

Whilst they were at their meal a note arrived for Rupert, whose brow puckered at the sight of the handwriting which he remembered well enough.

"Who is it from, dear?" asked Mrs. Ullershaw, when he had read it.

"Lord Devene," he answered shortly. "He wants Edith and myself to dine this evening, and says that he has got the Under-Secretary for War, Lord Southwick, to meet me. Of course I can't go and leave you alone the first night I am at home. I'll write and say so."

"Let me see the note first, dear. Edith, you read it; I have not got my spectacles."

So she read:

"DEAR RUPERT,—Welcome home, and, my dear fellow, a hundred congratulations! You have done splendidly. I hear your praises on all sides, and I am very proud of you. But I want to tell you all this in person. Come and dine to-night with Edith at eight. I have just met Southwick, the Under-Secretary for War, at the club, and he is most anxious to have a private talk with you before you report yourself, so he has put off something or other in order to meet you. I took the liberty of saying that he was sure to do this, as I knew that you could not as yet have made any engagements.—Your affectionate cousin, "DEVENE."

"I think that you must go, dear," said his mother.

"But I don't wish to," Rupert answered, with energy. "I hate dinner-parties."

"Dear, sooner or later you will have to, so why not now? Also Edith would be disappointed."

"Yes, of course," said that young lady. "I want to meet Lord Southwick. They say he is the greatest bore in London; quite a curiosity in his own line."

Then Rupert gave way, and having sent a verbal acceptance

by the footman, for the rest of the luncheon was as solemn as the bronze Osiris on the sideboard.

To a man like Rupert that dinner-party was indeed a terrible ordeal. Time had scarcely softened his vivid recollection of that horror of the past, over which he still mourned day by day with the most heart-felt remorse. With a shuddering of the soul he remembered its last dreadful chapter, and now almost he felt as though the book of some new tragedy, in which he must play the leading part, was about to be opened in the fateful company of Lord Devene. Most heartily did he wish himself back in the society of old Bakhita, or even of the Sheik of the Sweet Wells, in the Soudan, or in any other desolate place, so long as it was far from Mayfair. He even regretted having come home; but how could he refuse to do so at his mother's prayer? Well, it must be faced; escape was impossible, so he set his teeth and prepared to go through with the thing.

"Great Heavens, what a man!" reflected Edith to herself, glancing at his stern countenance, as he helped her from the cab that evening. "One might think he was going to execution, not to dinner."

The door—how grateful Rupert felt that it was a different door—opened, and there his gratitude faded, for behind the footman stood that identical spare, sombre-looking man who had told him of Clara's death. He had not changed in the slightest, Rupert would have known him a hundred yards off; and what was more, it seemed to him that the obsequious smile with which the butler greeted him had a special quality, that the sight of him suggested interesting memories to the smiler. What if this man—bah! the very thought of it made him feel cold down the back.

Edith vanished to take off her cloak, and he, who must wait for her, was left alone with that black, smiling demon.

"Glad to see you back safe and sound, Colonel," he said, as he took his coat.

"Wish I could say the same," grunted Rupert involuntarily.

The butler thought a little, for this cryptic sentence puzzled him; then taking the point, as he imagined, went on:

"Ah! I daresay you feel the changes, sir — in this establishment, I mean. Well"—and he glanced cautiously, first behind him and then at the powdered footmen by the door—"I am sure you won't betray me, sir, if I say that so do we. Her second ladyship, sir, isn't what her first ladyship was," and he sighed with genuine regret, for most of the servants had been very fond of poor Clara, who always tried to shield them from his lordship's anger, and was generous. "Her present ladyship, sir, preaches and drives, and makes us read tracts, sir," he added, with peculiar bitterness, "whereas we loved her first ladyship"—here his voice sank to a whisper —"almost as much as you did, sir."

At this moment, to Rupert's intense relief, for really his head was swimming beneath the horror of these confidences, the double front doors were thrown wide, and through them walked a stiff, poker-like man wearing an eyeglass, who, he gathered, was Lord Southwick. The butler, whose somewhat saturnine appearance in truth covered an excellent heart, and who really was delighted to see Rupert, if for no other reason, because his late mistress had been so fond of him, was obliged to step forward to take Lord Southwick's coat. At this moment, too, Edith arrived, looking radiant in a dress of black and silver, saying:

"Now, Rupert, I am ready."

"So am I, I am sure," he answered.

"Well, don't be reproachful, I have not been very long," and she fixed her gaze upon his head.

"Is anything wrong with my hair?" he asked, becoming aware of it.

"I don't know until you take your hat off," she replied gently, but wondering how long it might be since her distinguished cousin had gone out to dinner.

Rupert snatched off the hat and thrust it into the unwilling hands of one of the door footmen, for it was not his business to receive hats. Then, piloted by other footmen who met them at intervals, at length Miss Bonnythorne and Colonel Ullershaw were announced, in stentorian tones, at the threshold of the great drawing-room.

On the further side of the apartment two men were leaning against a marble mantel-piece, for the night was chilly, and a small fire burned on the hearth; while at a little distance, engaged apparently in looking straight before her, a placid, handsome-looking woman of stout proportions, with great coils of hair wound about her head, sat upon an Empire sofa, her hands folded upon her plain black dress, which was unrelieved by any jewellery.

For a moment Rupert's recognition of the men was merely automatic, since all his attention was taken up by the splendid mantel-piece that he remembered well, and on which he seemed to see the ghost of Clara leaning as she was wont to do. Yes; it was the same that had stood in her boudoir, moved here as too valuable to be left in the old mansion. He could not mistake those statues which supported the shelf above. A mist gathered before his eyes, and when it cleared he saw Lord Devene advancing on him with outstretched hand, nodding affectionately to Edith as he came.

The same man, he thought, only several degrees greyer in tone, and not quite so firm in his walk. Then, in the actual presence of his enemy—for so he felt him to be, now as always—the courage of the conscience-haunted Rupert returned to him, and he determined to play his part to the best of his ability.

As he approached, Lord Devene was thinking to himself: "Edith summed him up very well, as usual—a bear, but a fine, right-minded bear who has learnt his lesson once and for all. It is written on his face." Then he said in the most hearty fashion that he was able to command, though no

affectation of cordiality could altogether deaden the brassy ring of that well-remembered voice :

"Ah! here you are, punctual as a soldier should be, and very welcome, I can tell you, my dear Rupert. I am delighted to see you back safe and sound, and bringing your sheaves with you in the shape of all sorts of honours," and taking Rupert's great, sunburnt palm in his dry hand, he shook it, adding: "Why, what a big fellow you have become in every sense of the word. Don't ask me to mount you this season."

"Thank you," said Rupert simply, then fixing on the allusion to his personal appearance as easiest to deal with, went on. "Afraid one is apt to grow stout in Egypt. Can't get enough exercise, too much sun there. How are you?"

Then he stopped, for another voice, also well-remembered, was addressing him, and he turned to see his cousin Dick. Undoubtedly, even at that moment he noticed it, for by constitution and training Rupert was observant, Dick was a very handsome man. The dark and languid eyes looked a little tired, it was true, and the oval face had lost some of its colour. Still, it and the graceful, shapely form remained attractive to behold—at least, so thought many women.

"How do you do, my hero of a hundred fights?" said Dick, in the drawling, rather sarcastic voice which had always irritated his cousin as a boy, and still irritated him to-day.

"Very well, thank you, Dick," answered Rupert; "but I'm not a hero, and I have not been in a hundred fights."

"It's near enough," said Dick, shaking his hand in a somewhat weary fashion. "A man is what people choose to think of him, the exact facts don't matter. We have called you the family hero for years, and as our records reveal no other, of course we make the most of you."

"Then please stop calling me so now, there's a good fellow, for I don't like it. I am only a very ordinary officer in the Egyptian army."

"The great were ever modest," answered the exasperating Dick. "Why—" and he fixed his eyes upon his cousin's rather seedy dress-coat, "I hoped that you would come with all your orders on. Well, we'll get you to a public dinner where you will have to wear them."

"Stop talking nonsense, Dick," said Edith sharply, for she saw that Rupert was beginning to grow angry, and feared lest his cousin's jealous chaff should produce some explosion. "Here are Lord Southwick and the other people at last. Come, Rupert; I want to introduce you to Lady Devene."

So Rupert was introduced to her ladyship, who, awaking from her private meditations, held out her plump hand, looked him in the face with her fine, china-blue eyes, and said, with a German accent:

"Ah! you are the Colonel Ullershaw of whom I hear so much, the soldier who has been fighting bravely for the English. I am very glad to see you. I like soldiers; my father was a soldier, but the French killed him at Gravelotte. You are very welcome."

Rupert bowed, and as he did so felt that this lady spoke the truth, and that her greeting was cordial and without reservation. From the beginning he conceived a regard for this German peeress, feeling her to be sound and honest, according to her lights. Then Lord Devene brought up Lord Southwick and introduced him, first to his wife and next to Rupert. After this the other guests claimed attention, and Rupert was able to retire and employ himself in examining the pictures until dinner was announced.

To his delight he found that Edith was given to him as a partner.

"I am glad," he said shyly, as they went together down the broad stair. "I never hoped for such luck."

She looked at him innocently and asked: "What luck?"

"Why, having to take you down instead of one of those strangers."

"I am sure it is very nice of you to say so, Rupert, and I appreciate it," she answered, smiling.

"Yes," said the voice of Dick behind them; "but, old fellow, you should pay your compliments in a whisper. Sound travels up these London staircases," and he and his partner, a pretty and piquante heiress, laughed merrily.

"Take no notice of that impertinent Dick," said Edith as they entered the dining-room; "it is only his way."

"I don't like his way; I never did," grumbled Rupert.

Nor, to tell the truth, did Edith, who knew well that Dick was furiously jealous, and feared lest he should go too far and show it openly.

At dinner Rupert found himself seated on the left of Lady Devene, who was at the head of the table, and opposite to Lord Southwick, who had of course taken her down. Next to Lord Southwick was the pretty heiress, and by her Dick, who therefore sat almost opposite to Edith. With the rest of the company we need not concern ourselves.

The dinner went on as dinners in big houses do. After he had drunk some champagne, Dick began to flirt ostentatiously with the pretty heiress, who appeared to be quite equal to the occasion; his object being, as Edith was aware, to make her jealous, or at least angry. Lady Devene, in her German accent, conversed with Lord Southwick about cooking —a subject in which he did not seem to take the slightest interest; while Edith drew on Rupert to tell her of the Soudan and the military operations there in which he had shared. This subject suited him well, and Lord Devene, watching the pair of them from the bottom of the table, soon understood that he was talking in a manner that compelled the respect of her intelligence, since she listened to him intently enough.

Although Rupert did not know it, Lord Southwick began to listen also, and having exhausted the subject of *entrées*, so did Lady Devene.

"What was that you said about the advantages of the Suakim-Berber route, Colonel Ullershaw?" asked Lord Southwick, presently fixing his eyeglass upon him.

Rupert repeated his remarks.

"Hum," commented Lord Southwick. "Wolseley thought otherwise."

"I did not mean to set up my opinion against that of Lord Wolseley, my lord," answered Rupert; "it was only a private view I was expressing to Miss Bonnythorne."

"And a very sound view too, in my judgment," said the Under-Secretary, in the precise, official manner that rarely deserted him; "indeed, events have proved it to be so. Moreover, Colonel Ullershaw, your opinion is undoubtedly entitled to respect. I know it; for after hearing that I was to meet you at dinner, I looked up your record at the War Office and read a private memorandum, which you may remember writing for the information of your superior officers, though perhaps you were not aware that it was forwarded home."

Rupert coloured and muttered that he was not.

"I wish that it had been acted on," continued Lord Southwick; "but it wasn't, and there's an end. By the way—it is rather unkind to speak of it—but did you know, Colonel Ullershaw, that you were once recommended for the V.C.—after Tamai where you were wounded?"

Rendered absolutely speechless, Rupert shook his head.

"Well, you were; and what's more," he went on, with a twinkle in his eye, "you would have got it if your name hadn't happened to begin with a U. You see, the persons recommended of about equal merit or interest were put down alphabetically; and as there were only a certain number of crosses to be given, a fellow whose name began with T got one and you didn't. It wasn't my system, I may add, but as the man who was responsible for it is dead, and many things have happened since then, I don't mind telling the story."

"I am very glad," blurted out Rupert; "I never did anything to deserve the V.C."

Now this noble Under-Secretary who had been an official all his life—for he succeeded to his peerage in an accidental fashion—who looked like a ramrod, and who was reputed to be such a bore, was yet a man with a kind heart, an appreciation of worth and a sense of justice. Perhaps it was these qualities, or some of them, which caused him to answer:

"Well, you know best, and if so, it shows that the alphabetical system works better than might have been expected. But now give me your opinion, and you too, Lady Devene, on this case. An officer posted a picket outside a square. The square was attacked, picket cut off. Result of the attack indecisive, enemy being in possession of the bush about the square. Officer who posted the picket rather badly hurt by a spear through the shoulder—"

"I beg you," broke in Rupert; but Lord Southwick went on imperturbably:

"A wounded man crept into the square at night saying that he had survived the massacre of the picket and got through the enemy, but that the sergeant who was stabbed through the leg lay in a clump of bush about six hundred yards away, and had not yet been discovered by the Arabs, who occupied a donga in great force between the camp and the said clump of bush. It being impracticable to send a rescue party, the wounded officer dresses himself up in the jibba and turban of a dead Arab, and thus disguised, gets through the donga, finds the wounded man, and a storm coming on, contrives somehow or other to lead, or rather to carry him back to camp, doing the last hundred yards under a heavy fire both from the Arabs and our own sentries. Now did that officer deserve the Victoria Cross?"

"*Ach! mein Gott*, I should think so," said the phlegmatic Lady Devene, with a force quite foreign to her nature as it

was commonly understood by her surroundings. "What was the name of that brave man? I should like to know it."

"I forget," answered Lord Southwick, with a stony grin. "Ask Colonel Ullershaw. He may remember the incident."

"Who was it, Rupert?" said Edith, and the whole long table listened for the reply.

Then was the Recording Angel forced to add another to the list of Rupert's crimes, for he lied, and boldly.

"I don't know, I am sure. Never heard of the business; but if it happened at all, I should say that the story has been greatly exaggerated."

A smile and a titter went round the table, and the Under-Secretary grinned again and changed the subject.

For fully three minutes Lady Devene was lost in deep meditation. Then suddenly, while her husband was telling some story of grouse-shooting on a Scotch moor, from which they had just returned, she broke in in a loud voice, thumping her heavy hand upon the table:

"*Himmel!* I see it now. It is Lord Southwick's little joke. *You* are that man, Colonel Ullershaw."

Whereat the company broke into a roar of laughter, and Rupert nearly died of shame.

. . . . . .

The feast was over at last, and Lord Devene came into the hall to bid his guests good-bye.

"Well," asked Edith, as he helped her with her cloak, "you have seen him. What do you say now?"

"Excelsior!" he said. "You must climb that difficult height. You must marry him; that is, if you can, which I very much doubt."

"Do you indeed?" answered Edith. "Almost am I minded to try—for the sake of argument. Good-night!"

"Didn't I tell you he was a hero?" sneered Dick, as he led her to the cab. "Poor Edith! I pity you, exposed to the fascinations of such a warrior."

"Do you indeed," she repeated. "Well, I admit they are rather dangerous."

Meanwhile Lord Southwick had button-holed Rupert by the front door.

"I shall expect to see you, Ullershaw, at the War Office, where I wish to introduce you to the Secretary of State," he was saying. "Would to-morrow at half-past twelve suit you?"

Rupert, understanding that he had received an order, answered:

"Certainly, my lord, I will be there."

CHAPTER VI

RUPERT FALLS IN LOVE

THE next morning Rupert attended at the War Office, and actually was introduced by Lord Southwick to the Secretary of State. His conversation with the great man was not long—three minutes must have covered it. Still, even a person of Rupert's rather unusual modesty could scarcely fail to understand from its tone that he was looked on with favour in high places. The Right Honourable gentleman went so far indeed as to congratulate him upon his past services, of which he had evidently been informed, and to hint that his future might be brilliant. He asked him for how long he was on leave, and when he was told six months, smiled and remarked that it was a long time for so active a soldier to remain idle, adding:

"Now, if we wanted to send you anywhere before it expires, would you be willing to go?"

"Certainly, sir," replied Rupert, with enthusiasm, for already he seemed to have had almost enough of London, and for the moment forgot about his mother, forgot also that return to duty would mean separation from Edith, whose society he had begun to find so agreeable.

"Very well, Colonel Ullershaw," answered the Secretary of State. "Remember about it, Southwick, will you? All sorts of things keep cropping up out there in Egypt and the Soudan, and Colonel Ullershaw might be the man to deal with some of them," and he held out his hand to show that the interview was over.

"You have made an excellent impression, I am sure," said

Lord Southwick to him in the outer room. "Only let me give you a tip. Our chief is rather arbitrary in his ways, and expects to find the promptness upon which he prides himself reflected in others. If he should wish to employ you, as is quite likely, don't hesitate or ask for time to consider, but fall in with his views at once. It will be better for you afterwards, as if you don't, you probably will not be asked again."

Rupert thanked him for the hint and departed, reflecting that he was scarcely likely to hear more of the matter, especially as there were plenty of officers in Egypt capable of carrying out any mission or special service for which occasion might arise. He forgot that he was already considered successful; that he was, moreover, and probably would remain the heir to a very wealthy peerage; in short, a person such as those in authority like to employ, since unto him that hath shall be given.

Soon Rupert discovered that this attitude towards himself was very general; indeed, in a small way, he became something of a lion. In addition to his other advantages, Lord Southwick's Victoria Cross story, of which he was known to be the hero, had got about, with various embellishments, and excited curiosity, especially among women. When town filled again, he was asked to public dinners, where, as Dick had prophesied, he was obliged to wear his orders. The first two or three he rather enjoyed, but at length there came one when, to his horror, in the unexpected absence of some distinguished general, suddenly he found himself obliged to return thanks for the army. In fact, he got through it pretty well, as was testified by the cheers of a not too critical audience, but convinced that his failure had been complete, he went home in great trouble.

"What is the matter?" asked his mother, noting his gloomy face as he stalked into the little drawing-room which he seemed to fill with his uniform and decorations; and Edith added: "Why are you home so early?"

"I came away before the end," he said solemnly; "they forced me to speak, and I made a fool of myself."

Knowing Rupert, they did not take this statement too seriously, though Edith was somewhat relieved when, from the reports in the newspapers next morning, and from private inquiry, she satisfied herself that he had really done rather well.

However this might be, Rupert would go no more to public dinners, dreading lest again he should hear that awful and inaccurate eulogium of himself, and be once more requested to get up and give his views upon nothing in particular. However, plenty of private entertainments remained, and to these Edith saw that he did go, although it is true she did not particularly enjoy exposing him to the fascinations of various unengaged young ladies. But her cousin Devene's strict injunction notwithstanding, Edith had as yet by no means made up her mind to marry Rupert herself. She was thinking the matter over, very closely, that is all, and meanwhile had fully determined that he should marry no one else. So she was jealous of him, not for affection's sake, but for fear lest she should be forestalled.

Of affection, indeed, she had none for Rupert; if anything, she shrank from him personally—this big, rugged man—and his inner self she could not understand at all. He would converse with her on Egyptology and the art of war, and other subjects that bored her to death, not excluding religion at times. He would be earnest and take solemn views of things, conscientious also to an extent that was absolutely painful, even going so far as to reprove her for trifling society fibs. They had nothing in common—their two natures were as dissimilar as is the babbling stream from the black and iron rock over which it runs. Edith lived in the day for the day, to catch the sunlight, to flee from the shadow. Rupert remembered always that the day would soon be done, and that then must be rendered the account thereof; that the

watchword of life should be Duty and Self-effacement for the common good, the greatest gain of man.

At present, it is true, Edith had the art to hide these abysmal differences from his somewhat innocent eyes, although he did now and again wonder if she were not a little shallow. She listened to his discourses on the Pharaohs; she suffered him to draw her plans of battles which she was apt to look at upside down; she even took an apparent interest in his rather alarming views of human responsibilities, and his belief in redemption that must be earned by sacrifice. But oh! it was pain and grief to Edith, and though she was far too clever to show it in his presence, or even in that of his mother, when he had gone she would rise and dance about the room in joy at her deliverance; yes, and allow Dick to seek her out and even endure his tiresome jealousy for the mere pleasure of that congenial fellowship. But she never allowed him any more, being too wise to compromise herself in such a fashion.

"Oh!" Edith reflected to herself again and again, "if these things were done in the green tree, what would be done in the dry? If Rupert was so insufferable even as an admirer, what would he be like when he had assumed what she felt sure he would call the "duties and responsibilities of matrimony," in which she would be expected to take a daily and an ample part?

Meanwhile, her business was to make him fond of her—to persuade him that she was absolutely charming and necessary to his existence. Nor did Edith fail at the task. Gradually Rupert grew to adore her, till at length, like a sudden light, there arose in his mind an appreciation of the stupendous fact that, all unworthy as he was of such perfections, he might dare to cherish the ambition of making her his wife.

After all, Rupert was very human, and one who had long acknowledged the fact that though it may be salutary for his soul's health, it is not good for man to live alone. With

that one unfortunate exception in his early youth, he had fled from women, not because he did not like them, who was no misogynist, but because he deemed it right. But now, when he came to think of it, why should he not marry like other men, and be happy in his wife's love, and leave children—he who loved children—behind him, like other men? It was a great idea, and with Edith at his side, it grew upon him fast, unaware, as he remained, that the suggestion was one which emanated from the said Edith—not in words, but in a thousand acts and glances. He began to pay solemn court to her; he was dreadfully respectful and considerate; he blushed if any word with a double meaning were uttered in her presence, and when other men looked at her with admiration—and many did—he felt furious.

He gave her gifts also. The first of them was a huge blue scarabæus, set in gold, which, he informed her, he had himself removed from the breast of a body, where it had rested for three thousand years. Edith loathed that scarabæus, both for its associations and because it did not match any of her dresses; also because it assured her that the day of decision was drawing nigh. Yet she was obliged to wear it sometimes, until she managed to let it fall upon the pavement, where it was broken to bits, which bits she showed to Rupert, as it appeared to him, almost with tears. He consoled her, though his heart was wrung, for the thing was really good, and next week in triumph produced another and a larger one!

Such were the humours of the situation; its tragedies, very real ones, were to come!

It happened thus: Lord Devene, both for change of air and because he hated Christmas and everything to do with it, departed, as was his custom at that time of year, to spend a month at Naples. Thereon Lady Devene, as was *her* custom, migrated to Devene, the family place in Sussex. Now although the estates here were not so very large, for most of the Devene real property consisted of an acre or two of

houses in Shoreditch, a colliery, and the ancestral brewery, the house was magnificent and extensive. To be there alone oppressed even Lady Devene's phlegmatic temperament, so she asked various people who were more or less congenial to share her solitude. More especially did she insist that Rupert and his mother should come, for she liked them both, particularly Rupert. This involved the asking of Edith, whom she did not like, while Dick Learmer would be present as a matter of course in his capacity of secretary and factotum.

Rupert did not want to accept, although the shooting was excellent and he was fond of shooting. Even when Edith said that she should go anyhow—for in secret she longed for the relief of a little of Dick's society, in love as he was—he still hesitated. Then she remarked that it would be scarcely kind of him to deprive his mother of her only outing, since, if he stayed in London, she would stay also. So in the end Rupert yielded, for circumstances were too much for him. Yet he hated being obliged to accept this hospitality. Lord Devene might be absent, it was true, but the saturnine if friendly butler, and many painful memories, remained. Once before, when he was nineteen, Rupert had spent a Christmas at Devene!

It was New Year's Eve. That day, which was fine and frosty, was devoted to the shooting of the home coverts, where, as they lay extremely well upon the ridges of hills with little valleys between and not a pheasant had as yet been so much as fired at in them, the sport was very fine. Some of the ladies who were staying in the house, and amongst them Edith, came out after luncheon to see the shooting of the last beat, which was the great stand of the day, for it took over an hour to do, and if the guns were good, generally between three and four hundred pheasants were killed there. Here the woods ran down to a point, beyond which lay a valley. The guns were posted close together on the

further side of this valley in a gorge that led to a covert called the Wilderness, since, had they stood at the bottom, the pheasants would have passed over practically out of shot. As it was, they all sped on down the gorge, heading for the Wilderness a quarter of a mile away, and still travelling at a great height. Indeed, it was a good shot who brought down one in three of these pheasants at this time of year when they flew so boldly.

Rupert's place was at the centre of the gorge where the birds came highest, and a little above him, about five-and-twenty yards to his right, stood Dick Learmer, who, of course, arranged the shoot, and who was what in sporting parlance is called an "artist" at driven birds, though not so good when they had to be walked up, as he was easily tired and put off his form. He had placed Rupert in this very difficult spot, which was in full view of all the line of guns and one generally reserved for some great performer, because he was sure that, being totally unaccustomed to that kind of sport, he would make an exhibition of himself, especially as he had only one gun which must soon get very hot.

As it chanced, however, the young man who carried Rupert's cartridges, knowing this, lent him a thick dogskin glove for his left hand and ventured to give him a little good advice, namely, to stick to cocks, which were more easily seen, and of these only to fire at such birds as were coming straight over him. Rupert thanked him and chatted with Edith, who was his companion, until the sport began, remarking that it was very kind of Dick to have given him such a good place, which should have been occupied by a better man.

Presently the pheasants began to fly, and in that still air, cold with coming frost, went straight as arrows for their refuge in the Wilderness. The first cock came over at an enormous height.

"Fire ten yards ahead of it, sir," said the wise young man "and chuck back."

Rupert obeyed, and as his cartridges chanced to be loaded with No. 4 shot, brought down the bird, which fell stone-dead far behind him.

"Bravo!" said the gun on his left, "that was a good shot," and indeed its unexpected success put Rupert into excellent spirits and made him think that the thing was not so difficult after all.

Therefore, in the issue he did not find it difficult, for always remembering the instructions of his mentor to fire ten yards ahead, and never lifting his gun save at those cocks that came straight over him, letting all hens and wide birds go by, his success, with the help of the No. 4, was remarkable. Indeed, he brought down nearly as many birds with his one gun as most of the other sportsmen did with two, greatly to the delight of Edith, who from the beginning had fathomed Dick's kind intentions.

But Dick was not delighted, for this petty success of his rival irritated him. Therefore, as the long drive went on, meanly enough he set himself to disconcert him in a very unsportsmanlike manner. Noticing that Rupert was firing at those cocks that passed right over his head, neglecting his own birds whereof there were a plenty, Dick devoted himself to Rupert's, killing a number of them with long cross shots before Rupert could get off his gun.

Rupert said nothing, for there was nothing to say, though he could not help feeling a little annoyed, till at last he did speak—to Edith, asking why Dick did not confine himself to his own pheasants.

"Oh!" she answered, shrugging her shoulders, "because he's jealous even about his wretched shooting."

Then an accident happened, for one of the cocks, shot far forward by Dick in this unlawful fashion, in falling, struck Edith on the shoulder and knocked her straight backwards to the ground, where she lay quite still for a few moments, then sat up crying with the pain and gasping:

"Oh, it has hurt me so!"

Now Rupert's wrath broke out, and he shouted to Dick, who pretended not to have seen what had happened:

"Stop shooting and come here."

So Dick came.

"Look at the end of your infernal, unsportsmanlike tricks," said Rupert, his eyes blazing with anger. "You might have killed her."

"I am dreadfully sorry," answered Dick (and he was); "but really I don't see how I am responsible for the accident. It must have been your bird that struck her."

"It was not my bird, and you know it. Loader, who shot that pheasant?"

"Mr. Learmer, sir. It was coming over you very high, but Mr. Learmer fired before you could, and killed it."

Just then Edith staggered to her feet, looking very white.

"Go back to your stand, Dick," she said. "Rupert will help me home. Give me your arm, Rupert."

So very gently, half-supporting her as he had done many a wounded man, Rupert led her to the house, which was not far away, in his grief and confusion speaking tender words to her as they went, even to the length of calling her "dear" and "dearest." Edith did not answer him, who had a good excuse for keeping silent, although in reality she was much more frightened than hurt. But on the other hand, neither did she attempt to escape from the arm that was placed about her waist to bear her weight.

When she had reached her room, taken off her things and rubbed some liniment on the bruise—for she refused to allow the doctor to be sent for—Edith sat down in a chair before the fire and began to think. The crisis was at hand, that bird from the skies had precipitated it. After those words of Rupert's, things could not stay where they were. He must propose to her. But the question was—should she accept him? She had been debating the point with herself that very

morning, and practically had answered it in the negative. Notwithstanding Lord Devene's injunctions and the money which depended upon her obedience, so consumedly had Rupert bored her of late, so greatly did she dislike the idea of him as a lover and a husband, so infinite was the distance between them although his passion blinded him to the fact, that she had made up her mind to take the risks and have done with it all, to tell him that she had always looked upon him "as a friend and cousin," no more. Of course, under the circumstances, this would have been the kindest course towards Rupert, but that was a matter with which Edith never troubled her head. She looked at the question from the point of view of her own comfort and advantage and no other.

Well, this was her conclusion of the morning. The problem was—did it still hold good at the fall of night? She thought not. After all, Edith had the instincts of a lady, and this incident of the shooting, especially that of his pretending that it was not he who had shot the bird, revealed to her very clearly that in addition to his worthlessness and vices, Dick lacked those of a gentleman. That he was a coward also, who feigned ignorance of her hurt because he feared Rupert's anger, although she knew well that he must have been longing to run to her, whose one redeeming virtue in her eyes was that he worshipped the ground she walked on. Now Rupert was a gentleman to his finger-tips, strong, tender, and true, and with him she would be safe all her life. More, her anxieties would be at an end; probably she would become a peeress, the mistress of great rank and fortune, both of which she desired intensely; at the worst, she would be provided for, and the wife of a distinguished man who loved her, and who therefore would put up with much.

Yet Edith hesitated, for all these good things must be bought at the price of Rupert's constant company for years and years until one of them deceased. She was very unhappy and—her shoulder hurt. She wished that something would come

to decide her doubts, to take the responsibility out of her hands. Under the circumstances, many girls might have fallen back upon petitions for light and guidance to the Power that they believed to direct their destinies; but this was not Edith's way. Lord Devene's teaching had sunk deep into her heart, and she lacked faith in anything save the great blind, terrible, tumultuous world, whereon, born as she thought, of the will of the flesh alone, she flittered from darkness into darkness.

The maid brought up her tea, and on the tray was a letter which had come by the second post. It proved to be from Lord Devene, and began by giving her a sarcastic and amusing account of the humours of a Naples hotel. Its ending showed, however, that this was not the object of the epistle. It ran:

"I hear that you are all at Devene, including the Family Hero, who, I hope, has had his hair cut and bought himself a new hat. The party must be amusing. Write and tell me how many of them come down to morning prayers. Write and tell me your news also, my dear Edith, which I await with anxiety. It is time that matter was settled, for if it is left too long, R. may be sent spinning to the other end of the world, and be no more heard of for years. I will not recapitulate my arguments. I, who have your true interests at heart, wish it for good reasons, and that is enough. Trust yourself to me in this matter, Edith; I take the responsibility, who know more and see further than you do. Do not let any foolish whims, any girlish weakness, stand between you and your future. I have said; I beg of you to listen and obey.—Your affectionate,

"DEVENE."

Edith laid down the letter with a sigh of relief. The decision had been made for her and she was glad. She would marry Rupert. It was certain now that if they both lived she would marry Rupert as her cousin George commanded her to

do—for it was a command, no less. Yes; she was glad, as, notwithstanding her hurts, she dressed herself for conquest, determining to do the thing at once, and have that engagement scene a bad memory behind her.

But if there is any vision, any knowledge among those who dwell beyond, certain guardian angels upon this fateful night must have made up their books sad-eyed and sore-hearted.

CHAPTER VII

ENGAGED

NOT wishing to meet Dick until his temper was more composed after that day's adventure, Rupert did not go into the smoking or billiard-rooms before dinner, but retired to the library, purposing to spend there those dreary three hours which, in a country house, must be got through somehow between the advance of the mid-winter twilight and the welcome sound of the dressing-bell. His intention was to read a commentary on the Koran, if the somewhat agitated state of his mind would allow him to do so, for he loved to acquire miscellaneous learning, especially if it bore upon the East, its antiquities, religions, or affairs, a fact that Edith had good reason to lament. As it happened, this laudable project for the utilisation of spare time was frustrated by Lady Devene, who, finding out his whereabouts from the gloomy butler returning with an empty tea-cup, came to inquire of him the cause of Edith's accident. He told her the facts in his usual unvarnished style, minimising Dick's share in it as much as possible. But in spite of her phlegmatic exterior, Lady Devene was a quick judge of truth and character.

"Ach!" she said, "it is Dick's tricks again, and I do not like Dick; he is a bad lot, vain of his face, throwing himself head down upon any pleasure that comes, not working for himself; but what is the English word? Ah! I have it—a cadger, a bit of bad money that looks all right outside, no God-fearing man, in that way like his lordship" (she always

called her husband "his lordship"), "but without his brains; one wicked by weakness, not by will."

Rupert looked at her, not knowing exactly what to say.

"Ach!" she went on, "you stare at me; you who are his cousin think that I, who am his wife, am hard upon his lordship, but, *mein Gott!* who can be hard upon iron? It is the iron is hardest, and hurts what hits it. I say he is a terrible man."

"Then," asked Rupert solemnly, "why did you marry him?"

She looked up and down the great, lonely room lined with books, into which none save the housemaids ever penetrated, and then at the closed door behind her, and answered:

"I will tell you, Rupert, who are honest, who think as I do and believe in a God and judgment. I am well born in my own country, very well born, of an older and more distinguished family than any of you, who made your money out of brewing but the other day. But after my father's death in the war we were poor, my mother and I, so when that rich old Lady Hodgson, who was German born, you know, and a friend of our family, asked me to come to live with her for eight months of every year, and paid me well for it, why, I came. There I met his lordship, who found out that I sent most of my salary home to my mother, and that I thought otherwise than the fashionable English ladies about many things—children, for instance, and after the death of her first ladyship began to take much notice of me. At last one day he proposed, and I said, 'No,' for I always doubted that man. Then, oh! he was clever. What do you think he did? You see, he knew that I am brought up religious, so he tells me that he is greatly troubled by doubts, and that the real reason why he wants to marry me is that he thinks that I would be able to give him peace of soul again, and to bring him back into the fold of faith—yes, those were his words, 'the fold of faith.' Him! that black lamb!" she added, with a gasp of indignation, while Rupert burst out laughing.

"Ah!" she went on, "for you it is funny, but not for me.

Well, he over-persuades me, he tells me I shall be wicked if I turn a penitent soul back from the door of life by refusing to have anything to do with it, and so on, and so on, till, sheep's-head that I am, I believe him: Also my mother wish the marriage, and I liked to be noble in your country as well as my own. So I marry him and find out. The fold of faith! The door of life! Oh! the black goats live in that fold of his—the black, left-hand goats—and the door he knocks at, it is the door of hell. I find he believes in nothing, and when I reproach him, he tells me that it was only his little joke—his little joke to make me marry him, because he thought I should be a good, useful, domestic wife and a fine, handsome mother for his children. Ach! *mein Gott*, he said it was a little joke—" and rising from her chair in her woe and indignation, Tabitha held up her hands and turned her fair face to heaven, with a look on it like that of a saint who has just felt the first stroke of martyrdom. Indeed it was a very strange scene, and one that impressed Rupert deeply.

"And what has been the end about his children?" she went on tempestuously. "I have had how many—six, seven—oh! I do my duty, I promise and I pay, but these children they do not live. How can they live with that wicked man for father? The last—it lived some time, and I beg him to have it christened—yes, I crawl about on my knees on the floor after him and beg him let it be made a Christian, and he mocked me and my 'silly superstitions,' and he say he will not have it because the child will catch cold. And the child it do catch cold, the cold of death, and now that poor little soul of his it must live on unredeemed for ever, and perhaps, oh, perhaps suffer terribly because of the sin of that wicked man."

"Don't say that," said Rupert; "it's a hard creed, and I won't believe a word of it. The innocent can't be made to suffer for the guilty."

"Ah! but I do say it, and I do believe it, for I was so taught, and I tell you it torments me, and, Rupert, no child of mine will ever live! You will be the heir of all these lands and drink-shops and moneys, and may they bring you joy. As for me, I wish I were where her first ladyship is. Oh! I know they say he murdered her, that poor Clara, or drove her to death, and I daresay when I have no more children he will do the same to me. Well, I care nothing. And now I have told you and eased my heart, who have no friend but God since my mother died, and I thank you for listening so patient to my sad story, because I should like one of you to know the truth after it is all over—the truth of what comes to women who are led away by false words and the love of place and riches;" and once more throwing up her arms, she uttered two or three dry, hard sobs, then to Rupert's infinite relief, turned and left the room.

It seemed to be his fate to receive the confidences of the wives of Lord Devene, and Heaven knows he did not desire this second edition of them. Yet his heart bled for the poor German lady who had been beguiled to fill a place which, for all its seeming grandeur, was to her a very habitation in Purgatory, since day by day she saw her most cherished convictions trampled upon and scorned; while the cruel articles of her narrow creed bred in her mind the belief, or rather the mania, that the sin of the father was wreaked upon the bodies of her children, and even had power to pursue and torment their innocent souls. In its way, this tragedy was as great as that of her whom she succeeded, the wretched woman who, in her lawless search for relief from loveless misery, had found but death. Yet, alas! upon the head of that one he had brought down the evil, and the head of this one he was powerless to protect.

Nor, indeed, did Rupert wish to encourage such painful conversations, confidences, and the intimacy that must result from them. Therefore he was determined that he would get

away from Tabitha's house as soon as possible. But first he must find an opportunity of speaking to Edith and learn his fate. Indeed, after the words which had broken from his lips that day, it was his duty so to do. If only it could be accomplished this night, as it chanced he had a good excuse for departing on the following morning, since he had received a telegram from an old brother-officer, with whom he was engaged to stay in Norfolk, shifting the date of the visit and begging him, if possible, to come down on the morrow instead of that day week.

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As Rupert reflected thus, staring at the fire before which he stood, he heard the door open and close behind him, and turned round in alarm, thinking that Lady Devene had come back again. But it was not Lady Devene, it was Edith already dressed for dinner in a clinging robe of some soft white material, high because of the bruise on her shoulder; a bunch of forced lilies of the valley at her breast, her rich golden hair rippling upon either side of her small head and twisted into a great knot behind, and for ornaments a close-fitting necklace of fine pearls, Lord Devene's latest gift to her, and Rupert's great blue scarabæus, a single and imposing touch of colour in the whiteness of her dress.

"Oh," she said, "I came to look for Tabitha. What an awful name that is, it always sticks in my throat"—(this was a fib, because she had passed Lady Devene on the stairs, but it served her purpose)—"not to disturb your studies, my learned cousin. Don't look so alarmed, I will go away again."

"Oh, please don't," he answered. "Sit down here, do, and warm yourself. I was just—hoping to see you, and—behold! you glide into the room like, like — an angel into a dream."

"In answer to the prayers of a saint, I suppose," she replied. "Really, Rupert, you are growing quite poetical. Who taught

you such pretty metaphors? It must have been a woman, I am sure."

"Yes," he answered boldly, "that is, if it is pretty—a woman called Edith."

She coloured a little, not expecting anything so direct, but sat down in the chair staring at the fire with her beautiful dark blue eyes, and said, as though to turn the conversation:

"You asked about my shoulder, or if you didn't, you ought to have done. Well, there is a bruise on it as big as a saucer, all here," and with her first finger she drew a ring upon her dress.

"Confound him!" muttered Rupert.

"Him! Who? Dick or the cock-pheasant? Well, it doesn't matter. I agree, confound both of them."

Then there came a pause, and Rupert wrung his hands as though he were washing them or suffering pain, so that Edith could not help observing how large and red they looked in the firelight. She wished that he were wearing gloves, or would keep them in his pockets. It would make matters easier for her.

"I'm awfully glad you have come," he said awkwardly, feeling that if he didn't say something soon she would shortly go, "because I want to speak to you."

"What about? Nothing disagreeable, I hope. Has Tabitha been making confidences to you? If so, please do not pass them on to me, for they obliterate the romance and discredit the holy state of matrimony."

"Confound Tabitha," said Rupert again, "and her confidences!" for he was quite bewildered, and uttered automatically the first words that came into his mind.

"Again I agree, but soon we shall involve all our relatives in one universal condemnation, so let us drop that topic."

Then wearying of this fence, desiring to get the thing over, to have done with it, to see the doubtful bond signed, sealed, and delivered, suddenly Edith sat up in her chair and looked

at him. The blue eyes opened wide, and there came into them a light which he had never seen before, a splendid, dazzling light as though some veil of darkness had been withdrawn, revealing a hid glory; as though at last she suffered him to behold her soul. The face changed also, upon it the mask of coldness broke as ice breaks suddenly beneath the blaze of the sun and the breath of the western wind, disclosing, or seeming to disclose, a river of pure love that ran beneath. For one moment he resisted her as sometimes a moth appears to resist the splendour of flame, not because he desired to fight against his fate, but rather to let the wonder and the mystery of this sudden change engrave themselves for ever on his heart. Then as the white lids sank extinguishing those fires, till the shadow of the long lashes lay upon her cheek, he spoke in a low and hurried voice:

"I am all unworthy," he said. "I am not fit to touch your hand; but I cannot help it. I love you, and I dare to ask—oh, Edith, I dare to ask!—that you will give your life to me."

She sat quite still, making no motion of acceptance or dissent. It was as though she wished to hear more ere she spoke. But he, too, was silent—frightened, perhaps, by her stillness—finding no other words in which to recast the truth that he had uttered once and for all. Again the white lids were lifted, and again the wide eyes looked at him, but this time with no syren glance, for they were troubled—almost tearful. Then whilst he wondered how he should read their message, Edith rose slowly, and with an infinite deliberation raised her hand and held it out towards him. At length he understood, and taking that delicate hand, he pressed his lips upon it, then, greatly daring, placed his arms about her, drew her to him, and kissed her on the brow and lips.

"My shoulder," she murmured faintly; "it hurts," and full of contrition he let her sink back into her chair.

"Do you love me? Say that you love me, Edith," he whispered, bending over her.

"Have I not said?" she answered, glancing at her hand. "Do women—" and she ceased, and to Rupert this speech, and all that it conveyed, seemed the most beautiful avowal that ever passed the lips of pure and perfect maidenhood.

When the heart is too full for words, surely they are best left untried. Another thought came to him — a painful thought—for he moved uneasily, and turned red to the eyes, or rather, to the puckered brow above them.

"I must tell you," he said presently; "it is only right, and after you have heard you must finally decide, for I will not begin our engagement by keeping back anything from you whom I worship. Only you will not ask for names."

She lifted her head, as though in remonstrance, then reflecting that it is always well to know a man's secrets, checked herself. Also she was curious. What could this saint of a Rupert have done that was wrong?

"Once," he continued, slowly and painfully, "I committed a great sin—a love affair—a married woman. She is dead; it is all over, and, thank God! I have nothing more to confess to you."

Edith tried to appear grieved, but in reality, she was so intensely interested — so astonished, too, that any woman could have betrayed Rupert into an *affaire galante*—that to a dispassionate observer her effort might have seemed unsuccessful.

"I don't want to preach," she said. "I have been told that men are very different from what they expect us to be. Still, it was good of you to tell me, and there is no more to say, is there, except—" and she clasped her hands and looked up at him. "Oh, Rupert! I do hope that it was not—lately—for I thought—I thought—"

"Great Heavens!" he said, aghast; "why, it was when I was a boy, years and years ago."

"Oh!" she answered, "that makes it better, doesn't it?"

"It makes it less dreadful, perhaps," he said, "for I lost my reason almost, and did not understand."

"Well, who am I that I should judge you, Rupert? Let us never speak of it again."

"I am sure I don't want to," he replied, with fervour; "but indeed you are good and kind, Edith. I never expected it; I was afraid that when you had heard you would turn your back upon me."

"We are taught to forgive one another," she answered, a little smile that would not be suppressed trembling about the corners of her mouth; and again she held out her hand—this time the left—and suffered him to kiss it.

In fact, he did more, for drawing off the only ring he ever wore, an ancient gold ring carved with a strange device—it was the throne-name of a Pharaoh, which Pharaoh himself had worn for three thousand years within the tomb—he put it on her third finger as a sign and a token for ever.

"Another of those unlucky mummy things," reflected Edith. "I wish I could get clear of the Egyptians and everything to do with them. They seem to haunt me."

But she said nothing, only lifting the ring she touched it with her lips, a sight that may have surprised the spirit of Pharaoh.

"Rupert," she said, "don't say anything of this to-night, except to your mother, if you wish. You understand, Dick's temper is so very unpleasant, though," she added, with emphasis, "I hope you understand also that *I* have no confessions to make to you about him or anybody else. I can't help it if he has always—pursued me."

"He had better give up his pursuit now," grumbled Rupert, "or there will be trouble."

"Quite so. Well, I have no doubt he will, when he comes to know, only, to tell the truth, I would rather he didn't know while you are here. I don't want a scene."

"Well, if you like, dearest," said Rupert, "although I hate

it, I can go away to-morrow morning, and meet you in a few days in London," and he told her of his shooting engagement.

"That will suit very well indeed," she said, with relief, "although, as you say, it is horrid under our new circumstances, especially as to catch that train at Liverpool Street, you will have to leave by eight to-morrow. Well, you will be back on Saturday, so we must make the best of it. Good gracious, look at the clock, the dinner-bell will ring in two minutes, and you are not dressed. Go at once, dear, or—it will be noticed. There, that is enough. Go, darling, my lover who will be my husband, go."

And Rupert went.

"It was not so bad as it might have been," thought Edith to herself, as rubbing her face with her lace handkerchief the while, she watched the door close behind him, "and really he is very nice. Oh, why can't I care for him more? If I could, we should be happy, whereas now, I don't know. Fancy his telling me that story! What a curious man! It must have been Clara. I have heard something of the sort. Dick suggested as much, but I thought it was only one of his scandals. That's why Cousin George hates him so—for he does hate him, although he insists upon my marrying him. Yes, I see it all now, and I can remember that she was a very beautiful and a very foolish woman. Poor innocent Rupert!"

Rupert came down to dinner ten minutes late, to find that everybody had gone in. Arriving under cover of the fish, he took the chair which was left for him by Lady Devene, who always liked him to sit upon her right hand. Edith, he noted with sorrow, was some way off, between two of the shooting guests, and three places removed from Dick, who occupied the end of the table.

"Ach! my dear Rupert," said Lady Devene, "you are terribly late, and I could wait no longer, it spoils the cook. Now you shall have no soup as a punishment. What? Did you go to sleep over that big book of yours up in the library?"

He made some excuse, and the matter passed off, while he ate, or pretended to eat his fish in silence. Indeed to him, in his excited state of mind, this splendid and rather lengthy New Year's feast proved the strangest ot entertainments. There was a curious air of unreality about it. Could he, Rupert, after the wonderful and glorious thing that had happened to him utterly changing the vista of his life, making it grand and noble as the columns of Karnac beneath the moon, be the same Rupert who had gone out shooting that morning? Could the handsome, phlegmatic German lady who sat by him discoursing on the cooking be the same passion-torn, doom-haunted woman, who told him how she had crawled upon her knees after her mocking husband for the prize of her infant's soul? Nay, was it she who sat there at all? Was it not another, whom he well remembered in that seat, the lovely Clara, with her splendid, unhappy eyes full of the presage of death and destruction; those eyes that he felt still watched him, he knew not whence, reproaching him, warning him he knew not of what? Was the gay and beautiful lady yonder, who laughed and joked with her companions, the same Edith to whom he had vowed himself not an hour gone? Yes, it must be so, for there upon her finger gleamed his golden ring, and what was more, Dick had seen it, for he was watching her hand with a frown upon his handsome face.

Why, too, Rupert wondered, did another vision thrust itself upon him at this moment, that of the temple of Abu-Simbel bathed in the evening lights which turned the waters of the Nile red as though with blood, and of the smiling and colossal statues of the great monarch of long ago, whose ring was set upon Edith's hand in token of their troth? Of the dark, white-haired figure of old Bakhita also, who had not crossed his mind for many a day, standing there among the rocks and calling to him that they would meet again, calling to Dick and Edith also, something that he

could not understand, and then turning to speak to a shadow behind her.

. . . . . .

The meal ended at last, and as was the custom in this house, everyone, men and women, left the table together to go into the great hall hung with holly and with mistletoe, where there would be music, and perhaps dancing to follow, and all might smoke who wished. Here were some other guests, the village clergyman's daughters and two families from the neighbourhood, making a party of twenty or thirty in all, and here also was Mrs. Ullershaw, who had dined in her own room, and come down to see the old year out.

Rupert went to sit by his mother, for a kind of shyness kept him away from Edith. She laid her hand on his, and with a smile that made her grey and careworn face beautiful, said how happy she was, after so many lonely years, to be at the birth of one more of them with him, even though it should prove her last.

"Don't talk like that, mother," he answered, "it is painful."

"Yes, dear," she replied, in her gentle voice, "but all life is painful, a long road of renunciation with farewells for milestones. And when we think ourselves most happy, as I do to-night, then we should remember these truths more even than at other times. The moment is all we have, dear; beyond it lies the Will of God, and nothing that we can call our own."

Rupert made no answer, for this talk of hers all seemed part of his fantastic imaginings at the dinner-table, a sad music to which they were set. Yet he remembered that once before she had spoken to him of renunciation when, as a lad, he lay sick after the death of Clara; remembered, too, that from that day to this he had practised its stern creed, devoting himself to duty and following after faith. Why, now on this joyous night, the night of his re-birth in honest love, did his mother again preach to him her stern creed of renunciation?

At least it was one in which that company did not believe. How merry they were, as though there were no such things as sorrow, sickness, and death, or bitter disillusionment, that is worse than death. Listen! the music began, and see, they were dancing. Dick was waltzing with Edith, and notwithstanding her hurt shoulder, seemed to be holding her close enough. They danced beautifully, like one creature, their bodies moving like a single body. Why should he mind it when she was his, and his alone? Why should he feel sore because he whose life had been occupied in stern business had never found time to learn to dance?

Hark! the sound of the bells from the neighbouring church floated sweetly, solemnly into the hall, dominating the music. The year was dying, the new year was at hand. Edith ceased her waltzing and came towards Rupert, one tall, white figure on that wide expanse of polished floor, and so graceful were her slow movements that they put him in mind of a sea-gull floating through the air, or a swan gliding on the water. To him she came, smiling sweetly, then as the turret clock boomed out the hour of midnight, whispered in his ear:

"I whom you have made so happy wish you a happy New Year—with me, Rupert," and turning, she curtseyed to him ever so little.

In the chorus of general congratulations no one heard her low speech, though Mrs. Ullershaw noted the curtsey and the look upon Edith's face—Rupert's she could not see, for his back was to her—and wondered what they meant, not without anxiety. Could it be—well, if it was, why should the thing trouble her? Yet troubled she was, without a doubt, so much so that all this scene of gaiety became distasteful to her, and she watched for an opportunity to rise and slip away.

Meanwhile Rupert was enraptured, enchanted with delight, so much so that he could find no answer to Edith's charming speech, except to mutter—"Thank you. Thank you." Words would not come, and to go down upon his knees before her,

which struck him as the only fitting acknowledgment of that graceful salutation, was clearly impossible. She smiled at his embarrassment, thinking to herself how differently the ready-witted Dick, whose side she had just left, would have dealt with such a situation, then went on quickly:

"Your mother is preparing to leave us, and you will wish to go with her. So good-night, dearest, for I am tired, and shan't stop here long. I shall count the days till we meet in London. Again, good-night, good-night!" and brushing her hand against his as she passed, she left him.

CHAPTER VIII

EDITH'S CRUSHED LILIES

"RUPERT," said his mother, "I want you to give me your arm to my room, I am going to bed."

"Certainly," he answered; "but wait one minute, dear. I have to take that eight o'clock train to-morrow morning, so I will just say good-bye to Tabitha, as I shan't come back again."

Mrs. Ullershaw breathed more freely. If there were anything in the wind about Edith he would not be taking the eight o'clock train.

"Go," she said; "I'll wait."

Lady Devene was by herself, since amongst that gay throng of young people no one took much note of her, seated in a big oak chair on a little dais at the end of the hall far away from the fire and hot water coils, for she found the heat oppressive. As he made his way towards her even the preoccuped Rupert could not help noticing how imposing she looked in her simple black dress, which contrasted so markedly with her golden hair and white and massive face, set up there above them all, elbow on knee and chin on hand, her blue eyes gazing over their heads at nothingness. In reality, the miserable woman was greeting the New Year in her own fashion, not with gaiety and laughter, but with repentance for her sins during that which was past, and prayers for support during that which was to come.

"Ach, Rupert!" she said, rousing herself and smiling pleasantly as she always did at him, "it is kind of you to

leave those young people and their jokes to come to talk with the German frau, for that is what they call me among themselves, and indeed what I am."

"I am afraid," he said, "I have only come to say good-night, or rather good-bye, for I must go to town to-morrow morning before you will be down."

She looked at him sharply.

"So I have driven you away with my tale of troubles. Well, I thought that I should, and you are wise to leave this house where there is so much misery, dead and living, for no good thing can happen in it, no good thing can come out of it—"

"Indeed," broke in Rupert, "that is not why I am going at all, it is because—" and he told her of the visit he must pay.

"You do not speak fibs well like the rest of them, Rupert; you have some other reason, I see it on your face, something to do with that dreadful Dick, I suppose, or his—ach! what is the English word—his flame, Edith. What? Has she been playing tricks with you too? If so, beware of her; I tell you, that woman is dangerous; she will breed trouble in the world like his lordship."

Rupert felt very angry, then he looked at that calm, fateful face which a few hours before he had seen so impassioned, and all his anger died, and was replaced by a fear which chilled him from head to heel. He felt that this brooding, lonely woman had insight, born perhaps of her own continual griefs; that she saw deep into the heart of things. He who understood her, who sympathised with, even if he did not entirely adopt her stern religious views, who knew that prayer and suffering are the parents of true sight, felt sure that this sight was hers. At least he felt it for a moment, then the unpleasant conviction passed away, for how could its blackness endure in the light of the rosy optimism of new-risen and successful love?

"You are morbid," he said, "and although I am sure you

do not wish to be so, that makes you unjust, makes you pass hard judgments."

"Doubtless it is true," she replied, with a sigh, "and I thank you for telling me my faults. Yes, Rupert, I am morbid, unjust, a passer of hard judgments, who must endure hard judgment," and she bowed her stately, gold-crowned head as before the appointed stroke of wrath, then held out her hand and said simply: "Good-bye, Rupert! I do not suppose that you will often come to see me more—ach! why should you? Still if you do, you will be welcome, for on you I pass no hard judgments, and never shall, whatever they say of you."

So he shook her hand and went away saddened.

Giving his mother his arm, for she was very infirm, Rupert led her quietly out of a side door and down the long passages to her room, which was next to his own at the end of the house, for stairs being difficult to her, she slept on the ground floor, and he at hand to keep her company.

"Mother," he said, when he had put her in her chair and stirred the fire to a blaze, "I have something to tell you."

She looked up quickly, for her alarm had returned, and said: "What is it, Rupert?"

"Don't look frightened, dear," he replied, "nothing bad, something very good, very happy. I am engaged to be married to Edith, and I have come to ask your blessing on me, or rather on both of us, for she is now a part of me."

"Oh, Rupert, you have that always," she answered, sinking back in her chair; "but I am astonished."

"Why?" he asked, in a vexed voice, for he had expected a flow of enthusiasm that would match his own, not this chilly air of wonderment.

"Because—of course, nobody ever told me so—but I always understood that it was Dick Learmer whom Edith cared for, that is why I never thought anything of her little *empressé* ways with you."

Again Rupert was staggered. Dick—always Dick, first

from Lady Devene and now from his mother. What could be the meaning of it? Then again optimism came to his aid, he who knew full surely that Dick was nothing to Edith.

"You are mistaken there for once, mother," he said, with a cheerful laugh; "I knew from the first what she thought about Dick, for she spoke very seriously to me of him and his performances in a way she would never have done if there were anything in this silly idea."

"Women often do speak seriously of the bad behaviour of the man of whom they are fond, especially to one whom they think may influence him for good," replied his mother, with the wistful smile which she was wont to wear when thinking of her own deep affection for a man who had deserved it little.

"Perhaps," he said. "All I have to say is that if ever there was anything—and I know there wasn't—it is as dead as last month's moon."

Mrs. Ullershaw thought to herself that this simile drawn from the changeful moon, that waxes anew as surely as it wanes, was scarcely fortunate. But she kept a watch upon her lips.

"I am very glad to hear it," she said, "and no doubt it was all a mistake, since, of course, if she had wished it, she might have married Dick long ago, before you came into her life at all. Well, dearest, I can only say that I wish you every happiness, and pray that she may be as good a wife to you as I know you will be husband to her. She is lovely," she went on, as though summing up Edith's best points, "one of the most graceful and finished women whom I have ever seen; she is very clever in her own way, too, though perhaps not in yours; thoughtful and observant. Ambitious also, and will therefore make an excellent wife for a man with a career. She is good-tempered and kind, as I know, for we have always got on well during the years we have lived together. Yes, you will be considered very fortunate, Rupert."

"These are her advantages, what are her drawbacks?" he

asked shrewdly, feeling that his mother was keeping something from him, "though I must say at once that in my eyes she has none."

"Which is at it should be, Rupert. Well, I will tell you frankly, so that you may guard against them if I am right. Edith likes pleasure and the good things of the world, as, after all, is only natural, and she is extravagant, which perhaps in certain circumstances will not matter. Again, I hope you will never fall ill, for she is not a good nurse, not from unkindness, but because she has a constitutional horror of all ill-health or unsightliness. I have seen her turn white at meeting a cripple even, and I don't think that she has ever quite liked sitting with me since I had that stroke, especially while it disfigured my face and made the lower eyelid drop."

"We all have failings which we can't help," he answered; "natural antipathies that are born in us, and I am glad to say I am fairly sound at present. So I don't think much of that black list, mother. Anything to add to it?"

She hesitated, then said:

"Only one thing, dear. It does strike me as curious that such a girl as Edith should be so attached to men like Dick Learmer and Lord Devene, for she *is* fond of them both."

"Relationship, I suppose; also the latter has been very kind to her, and doubtless she is grateful."

"Yes, most kind; indeed, he was her guardian until she came of age, and has practically supported her for years. But it isn't gratitude, it is sympathy between her and him. They are as alike in character, mentally, I mean, as—as they are in face."

Rupert laughed, for to compare the blooming Edith with the faded, wrinkled Devene, or even her quick humour that turned men and things to mild ridicule, with his savage cynicism which tore them both to pieces and stamped upon their fragments, seemed absurd.

"I can't see the slightest resemblance," he said. "You are cultivating imagination in your old age, mother."

She looked up to answer, then thought a moment, and remarked:

"I daresay that you are perfectly right, Rupert, and that these things are all my fancy; only, my dear boy, try to make her go to church from time to time, that can't do any woman harm. Now I have done with criticisms, and if I have made a few, you must forgive me; it is only because I find it hard to think that any woman can be worthy of you, and of course the best of us are not perfect, except to a lover. On the whole, I think that I may congratulate you, and I do so from my heart. God bless you both; you, my son, and Edith, my daughter, for as such I shall regard her. Now, dear, good-night, I am tired. Ring the bell for the maid, will you?"

He did so, and then by an afterthought said:

"You remember that I have to go away. You will speak to Edith, won't you?"

"Of course, my love, when Edith speaks to me," the old lady replied, with gentle dignity. "But why, under the circumstances, are you going?"

At that moment the maid entered the room, so he gave no answer, only made a few remarks about the manner of his mother's journey back to town and kissed her in good-bye.

When the maid had left again Mrs. Ullershaw, as was her custom, said her prayers, offering up petitions long and earnest for the welfare of her beloved only son, and that the woman whom he had chosen might prove a blessing to him. But from those prayers she could take no comfort, they seemed to fall back upon her head like dead things, rejected, or unheard, she knew not which. Often she had thought to herself how happy she would be when Rupert came to tell her that he had chosen a wife, yet now that he had chosen, she was not happy.

Oh, she would tell the truth to her own heart since it must never pass her lips. She did not trust this gay and lovely woman; she thought her irreligious, worldly, and self-seeking;

she believed that she had engaged herself to Rupert because he was the heir to a peerage and great wealth, distinguished also; not because she loved him. Although her son was of it, she hated the stock whence Edith sprang; as she knew now, from the first Ullershaw, who founded the great fortunes of the family, in this way or that they had all been bad, and Edith, she was certain, had not escaped that taint of blood. Even in Rupert, as the adventure of his youth proved, it was present, and only by discipline and self-denial had he overcome his nature. But Edith and self-denial were far apart. Yes; a cold shadow fell upon her prayers, and it was cast by the beautiful form of Edith—Edith who held Rupert's destiny in her hands.

Within a few feet of her Rupert also offered up his petitions, or rather his pæan of thanksgiving and praise for the glory that had fallen from Heaven upon his mortal head, for the pure and beautiful love which he had won that should be his lamp through life and in death his guiding-star.

. . . . . .

A while after Rupert had gone, half an hour perhaps, Edith, noticing that Dick had left the hall, as she thought to see off the last of the departing guests, took the opportunity to slip away to bed since she wished for no more of his company that night. Yet she was not destined to escape it, for as she passed the door of the library on her way up stairs, that same room in which Rupert had proposed to her, she found Dick standing there.

"Oh," he said, "I was looking for you. Just come in and tell me if this belongs to you. I think you must have left it behind."

Carelessly, without design or thought, she stepped into the room, whereon he closed the door, and as though by accident placed himself between it and her.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, for her curiosity was stirred; she thought that she might have dropped something during

her interview with Rupert. "Where is it? What have I lost?"

"That's just what I want to ask you," he answered, with a scarcely suppressed sneer. "Is it perhaps what you are pleased to call your heart?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Edith interrogatively.

"Well, on the whole, you may have reason to do so. Come, Edith, no secrets between old friends. Why do you wear that ring upon your finger? It was on Ullershaw's this morning."

She reflected a moment, then with characteristic courage came to the conclusion that she might as well get it over at once. The same instinct that had prompted her to become engaged to Rupert within half an hour of having made up her mind to the deed, made her determine to take the opportunity to break once and for all with her evil genius, Dick.

"Oh," she answered calmly, "didn't I tell you? I meant to in the hall. Why, for the usual reason that one wears a ring upon that finger—because I am engaged to him."

Dick went perfectly white, and his black eyes glowed in his head like half-extinguished fires.

"You false—"

She held up her hand, and he left the sentence unfinished.

"Don't speak that which you might regret and I might remember, Dick; but since you force me to it, listen for a moment to me, and then let us say good-night, or good-bye, as you wish. I have been faithful to that old, silly promise, wrung from me as a girl. For you I have lost opportunity after opportunity, hoping that you would mend, imploring you to mend, and you, you know well how you have treated me, and what you are to-day, a discredited man, the toady of Lord Devene, living on his bounty because you are useful to him. Yet I clung to you who am a fool, and only this morning I made up my mind to reject Rupert also. Then you played that trick at the shooting; you pretended not to see that I

was hurt, you pretended that you did not fire the shot, because you are mean and were afraid of Rupert. I tell you that as I sat upon the ground there and understood, in a flash I saw you as you are, and I had done with you. Compare yourself with him and you too will understand. And now, move away from that door and let me go."

"I understand perfectly well that Rupert is the heir to a peerage and I am not," he answered, who saw that, being defenceless, his only safety lay in attack. "You have sold yourself, Edith, sold yourself to a man you don't care *that* for," and he snapped his fingers. "Oh, don't take the trouble to lie to me, you know you don't, and you know that I know it too. You have just made a fool of him to suit yourself, as you can with most men when you please, and though I don't like the infernal, pious prig, I tell you I am sorry for him, poor beggar."

"Have you done?" asked Edith calmly.

"No, not yet. You sneer at me and turn up your eyes—yes, you—because I am not a kind of saint fit to go in double harness with this Rupert, and because, not being the next heir to great rank and fortune, I haven't been plastered over with decorations like he has for shooting savages in the Soudan because, too, as I must live somehow, I do so out of Devene. Well, my most immaculate Edith, and how do you live yourself? Who paid for that pretty dress upon your back, and those pearls? Not Rupert as yet, I suppose? Where did you get the money from with which you helped me once? I wish you would tell me, because I have never seen you work, and I would like to have the secret of plenty for nothing."

"What is the good of asking questions of which you perfectly well know the answer, Dick? Of course George has helped me. Why shouldn't he, as he can quite well afford to, and is the head of the family? Now I am going to help myself in the only way a woman can, by prudent

and respectable marriage, entered on, I will tell you in confidence, with the approval, or rather by the especial wish of George himself."

"Good Lord!" said Dick, with a bitter laugh. "What a grudge he must have against the man to set you on to marry him! Now I am certain there is something in all that old talk about the saint in his boyhood and the lovely and lamented Clara. No; just spare me three minutes longer. It would be a pity to spoil this conversation. Has it ever occurred to you, most virtuous Edith, that whatever I am—and I don't set up for much—it is you who are responsible for me; you who led me on and threw me off by fits, just as it suited you; you who for your own worldly reasons never would marry, or even become openly engaged to me, although you said you loved me—"

"I never said that," broke in Edith, rousing herself from her attitude of affected indifference to this tirade. "I never said I loved you, and for a very good reason, because I don't, and never did, you or any other man. I can't—as yet, but one day perhaps I shall, and then—I may have said that you attracted me—me, who stand before you, not my heart, which is quite a different matter, as men like you should know well enough."

"Men like me can only judge of emotions by the manner of their expression. Even when they do not believe what she says, they take it for granted that a woman means what she does. Well, to return, I say that you are responsible, you and no other. If you had let me, I would have married you and changed my ways, but though you were 'attracted,' this you would never do because we should have been poor. So you sent me off to others, and then, when it amused you, drew me back again, and thus sank me deeper into the mud, until you ruined me."

"Did I not tell you that you are a coward, Dick, though I never thought that you would prove it out of your own mouth within five minutes. Only cowards put the burden of their

own wrong-doing upon the heads of others. So far from ruining you, I tried to save you. You say that I played with you; it is not the truth. The truth is, that from time to time I associated with you again, hoping against hope that you might have reformed. Could I have believed that you meant to turn over a new leaf, I think that I would have risked all and married you, but, thank God! I was saved from that. And now I have done with you. Go your way, and let me go mine."

"Done with me? Not quite, I think, for perhaps the old 'attraction' still remains, and with most women that means repulsion from other men. Let us see now," and suddenly, without giving her a single hint of his intention, he caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately. "There," he said, as he let her go; "perhaps you will forgive an old lover—although you are engaged to a new one?"

"Dick," she said, in a low voice, "listen to me and remember this. If you touch me like that again, I will go straight to Rupert, and I think he would kill you. As I am not strong enough to protect myself from insult, I must find one who is. More, you talk as though I had been in the habit of allowing you to embrace me, perhaps to pave the way for demands of blackmail. What are the facts? Eight or nine years ago, when I made that foolish promise, you kissed me once, and never again from that hour to this. Dick, you coward! I am indeed grateful that I never felt more than a passing attraction for you. Now open that door, or I ring the bell and send for Colonel Ullershaw."

So Dick opened it, and without another word she swept past him.

Edith reached her room so thoroughly upset that she did what she had not done since her mother's death—sat down and cried. Like other people, she had her good points, and when she seemed to be worst, it was not really of her own

will, but because circumstances overwhelmed her. She could not help it if she liked, or, as she put it, had been "attracted" by Dick, with whom she was brought up, and whose ingrained natural weakness appealed to that sense of protection which is so common among women, and finds its last expression in the joys and fears of motherhood.

Every word she had spoken to him was true. Before she was out of her teens, overborne by his passionate attack, she had made some conditional promise that she would marry him at an undefined date in the future, and it was then for the first and—until this night—the last time that he had kissed her. She had done her best to keep him straight, an utterly impossible task, for his ways were congenitally crooked, and during those periods when he seemed to mend, had received him back into her favour. Only that day she had at last convinced herself that he was beyond hope, with the results which we know. And now he had behaved thus, insulting her in a dozen directions with the gibes of his bitter tongue, and at last most grossly by taking advantage of his strength and opportunity to do what he had done.

The worst of it was that she could not be as angry with him as she ought, perhaps because she knew that his outrageous talk and behaviour sprang from the one true and permanent thing in the fickle constitution of Dick's character—his love for her. That love, indeed, was of the most unsatisfactory kind. For instance, it did not urge him on to honest effort, or suffice to keep him straight, in any sense. Yet it existed, and must be reckoned with, nor was she upon whom it was outpoured the person likely to take too harsh a view even of its excesses. She could ruin Dick if she liked. A word to Lord Devene, and another to Rupert, would be sufficient to turn him out to starve upon the world, so that within six months he might be sought for and found upon the box of a hansom cab, or in the bunk of a Salvation Army shelter. Yet she knew that she would never speak those words, and

that he knew it also. Alas! even those insolent kisses of his had angered rather than outraged her; after them she did not rub her face with her handkerchief as she had done once that day.

Again, it was not her fault if she shrank from Rupert, whom she ought to, and theoretically did, adore. It was in her blood, and she was not mistress of her blood; for all her strength and will she was but a feather blown by the wind, and as yet she could find no weight to enable her to stand against that wind. Still, her resolution never wavered; she had made up her mind to marry Rupert—yes, and to make him as good a wife as she could be, and marry him she would. Now there were dangers ahead of her. Someone might have seen her go into that library with Dick at near one o'clock in the morning. Dick himself might drop hints; he was capable of it, or worse. She must take her precautions. For a moment Edith thought, then going to a table, took a piece of paper and wrote upon it:

"*1st January.* 2 A.M.

"To RUPERT,—A promise for the New Year, and a remembrance of the old, from her who loves him best of all upon the earth. "E."

Then she directed an envelope, and on the top of it wrote that it was to be delivered to Colonel Ullershaw before he left, and took from her breast the lilies she had worn, which she was sure he would know again, purposing to enclose them in the letter, only to find that in her efforts to free herself from Dick, they had been crushed to a shapeless mass. Almost did Edith begin to weep again with vexation, for she could think of nothing else to send, and was too weary to compose another letter. At this moment she remembered that these were not all the lilies which the gardener had sent up to her. In a glass stood the remainder of them. She

went to it, and carefully counted out an equal number of sprays and leaves, tied them with the same wire, and having thrown those that were broken into the grate to burn, enclosed them in the envelope.

"He will never know the difference," she murmured to herself, with a dreary little smile, "for when they are in love who can tell the false from the true?"

CHAPTER IX

RUPERT ACCEPTS A MISSION

THE interval between the 1st of January and the 13th of April, the day of Rupert's marriage, may be briefly passed over. All the actors are on the scene, except those who have to arrive out of the Soudanese desert; their characters and objects are known, and it remains only to follow the development of the human forces which have been set in motion to their inevitable end, whatever that may be.

The choosing of this date, the 13th, which chanced to be a Friday, was one of the grim little jokes of Lord Devene, from whose house the marriage was to take place; a public protest against the prevalence of vulgar superstitions by one who held all such folly in contempt. To these Rupert, a plain-sailing man who believed his days to be directed from above, was certainly less open than most, although even he, by choice, would have avoided anything that might suggest unpleasant thoughts. Edith, however, neglectful as she was of any form of religion, still felt such ancient and obscure influences, and protested, but in vain. The date suited him, said her cousin. There were reasons why the marriage could not take place before, and on Saturday, the 14th, he had to go away for a fortnight to be present in Lancashire at an arbitration which would be lengthy, and held *in situ*, as to legal matters connected with his coal-mines. So she yielded, and the invitations were issued for Friday, the 13th of April.

Meanwhile things went on much as might be expected. Rupert sat in Edith's pocket and beamed on her all day, never

guessing, poor, blind man, that at times he bored her almost to madness. Still she played her part faithfully and well, paying him back word for word and smile for smile, if not always tenderness for tenderness. Mrs. Ullershaw, having shaken off her preliminary fears and doubts, was cheerful in her demeanour, and being happy in the happiness of her son, proclaimed on every occasion her complete contentment with the match. Lord Devene appeared pleased also, as indeed he was, and lost no opportunity of holding up Rupert as a model lover, while that unfortunate man writhed beneath his sarcasms.

Thus once—it was after one of those Grosvenor Square dinners which Rupert hated so heartily, he found a chance of pointing a moral in his best manner. Rupert, as usual, had planted himself by Edith in a corner of the room, whence, much as she wished it, she could not escape, making of her and himself the object of the amused attention of the company.

"Look at them," said Lord Devene, who had unexpectedly entered, with a smile and a wave of the hand that made everybody laugh, especially Dick, who found their aspect absurd.

"Rupert, do get up," said Edith; "they are laughing at us."

"Then let them laugh," he grumbled, as he obeyed, following her sheepishly to the centre of the room.

While they advanced, some new sally which they could not hear provoked a fresh outburst of merriment.

"What is it that amuses you?" asked Rupert crossly.

"Ach, Rupert," said Lady Devene, "they laugh at you because you do like to sit alone with your betrothed; but I do not laugh, I think it is quite proper."

"Tabitha puts it too roughly," broke in Lord Devene. "We are not making fun of beauty and valour completing each other so charmingly in that far corner, we are paying

them our tribute of joyous and respectful admiration. I confess that it delights me, who am getting old and cynical, to see people so enraptured by mere companionship. That, my dear Rupert, is what comes of not being blasé. With the excellent Frenchman, you can say: 'J'aime éperdument et pour toujours car je n'ai jamais éparpillé mon cœur; le parfait amour c'est la couronne de la vertu.' Now you reap the rich reward of a youth which I believe to have been immaculate. Happy is the man who, thrusting aside, or being thrust aside of opportunity, reserves his first great passion for his wife."

A renewed titter greeted this very elaborate sarcasm, for so everyone felt it to be, especially Rupert, who coloured violently. Only Lady Devene came to his aid and tried to cover his confusion.

"Bah!" she said, "your wit, George, seems to smell of the lamp and to have a nasty sting in its tail. Why should you mock at these young people because they are honest enough to show that they are fond of each other, as they ought to be? Pay no attention and go back to your corner, my dears, and I will come and sit in front of you; or at least tell them they should be sorry they cannot say *they* have not scattered their hearts about; that is what the French word means, doesn't it?"

Then in the amusement that was caused by Lady Devene's mixed metaphors and quaint suggestion that with her ample form she should shelter the confidences of Rupert and Edith from prying eyes, the joke was turned from them to her, as she meant that it should be, and finally forgotten. But neither Rupert nor Edith forgot it. Never again did they sit close together in that Grosvenor Square drawing-room, even in the fancied absence of Lord Devene, a result for which Edith, who hated such public demonstrations, was truly grateful.

For a while after the announcement of the engagement Rupert and Dick had seen as little of each other as was possible, the former, because he had not forgiven Dick's

conduct at the shooting party, which impressed his mind far more than the vague talk about him and Edith in the past. In this, indeed, he had never believed, and his nature being utterly unsuspicious, it was now totally forgotten. As for Dick, he had his own reasons for the avoidance of his successful rival, whom all men and women united to honour. By degrees, however, Edith, who lived in perpetual fear of some passionate outburst from Dick, managed to patch up their differences, at least to the outward eye, for the abyss between them was too wide to be ever really bridged. Indeed, her efforts in this direction nearly resulted in what she most wanted to avoid, an open quarrel.

It came about in this fashion. The opportunity which had been foreseen arose; the sitting member for that county division in which Lord Devene lived had retired, and Dick was put up to contest the seat in the Radical interest against a strong and popular Conservative candidate. His chances of success were fair, as the constituency was notoriously fickle, and public feeling just then was running against the Tories. Also Lord Devene, although as a peer he could take no active part in the election, was using his great wealth and interest in every legitimate way to secure his nominee's return.

When the contest, with the details of which we need not concern ourselves, drew near its close, Dick himself suggested that it might help him, and give variety to one of his larger meetings, if Rupert would come and talk a little about Egypt and the Arabs with whom he had fought so often. He knew well that although country people will attend political gatherings and shout on this side or on that according as they think that their personal advantage lies, all the best of them are in reality far more interested in exciting stories of fact from someone whom they respect, than in the polemics of party politicians.

When the suggestion was made to him, needless to say, Rupert declined it at once. Theoretically, he was a Liberal; that is to say, like most good and earnest men he desired the

welfare of the people and the promotion of all measures by which it might be furthered. But on the other hand, he was no bitter Radical of the stamp of Lord Devene, who wished to pull down and burn for the sake of the crash and the flare; and he was, on the other hand, what nowadays is called an Imperialist, believing in the mission of Britain among the peoples of the earth, and desiring the consolidation of her empire's might because it meant justice, peace, and individual security; because it freed the slave, paralysed the hands of rapine, and caused the corn to grow and the child to laugh.

Now Rupert did not consider that these causes would be promoted by the return of Dick to Parliament, where he would sit as a mouthpiece of Lord Devene. Then Edith intervened, and dropping Dick out of the matter, asked him to do this for her sake. She explained that for family reasons it would be a good thing if Dick won this seat, as thereby a new career would be open to him who sadly needed one; also that Dick himself would be most grateful.

The end of it was that Rupert consented, forgetting, or not being aware, that as an officer on leave he had no business to appear upon a party platform, a fact of which Dick did not think it necessary to remind him.

The meeting, which was one of the last of the campaign, took place in the corn-hall of a small country town, and was crowded by the supporters of Dick and a large contingent of his opponents. The candidate himself, who spoke glibly and well enough, for as Edith and others had often found out, Dick did not lack for readiness, gave his address, which was cheered by his friends and groaned at by his foes. It was of the stereotyped order—that is to say, utterly worthless, a mere collection of the parrot platitudes of the hour by which the great heart of the people was supposed to be moved, but for all that, well and forcibly delivered.

Then followed a heavy and long-winded member of Parliament, at whom, before he had done, the whole room

hooted, while some of the occupants of the back benches began to sing and shuffle their feet. Next the chairman, a prosperous local manufacturer, rose and said that he was going to call upon Colonel Ullershaw of the Egyptian army, Companion of the Bath, member of the Distinguished Service Order, and of the Turkish Order of the Medjidie (he called it "Gee-gee," or something like it), and the possessor of various medals, to say nothing of his being the relative and present heir of their most esteemed friend and neighbour, the noble Lord Devene, and therefore intimately connected with every one of them, to address them. The gallant Colonel would not make them a political speech, as they had had enough of politics for that night (at this the audience enthusiastically shouted, *Hear, hear!*), but he would tell them about the wars in Egypt which, although many of them did not approve of those wars, were still interesting to hear about as at any rate they paid for them (more *hear, hears!*). He might well call him gallant, as they would say also when he told them the following story, and to the absolute horror of Rupert, who was literally writhing on a back seat behind this dreadful man, and to the amusement of Edith sitting at his side, he proceeded to give a highly-coloured and garbled version of the exploit that did *not* win him the Victoria Cross, whereon a voice shouted:

"That's all true. I was there. I saw the Colonel come in with the man." (Renewed and tempestuous cheers.)

There being no help for it, Rupert rose, and was warmly greeted. He had never given his mind to public speaking, and although his voice was good and resonant, it cannot be said that at the beginning his remarks compelled attention. Indeed, after five minutes of them, Dick and his agent, counting him a failure, began to consult as to how they could get him down, while Edith felt mortified. Then, as he wandered on with a long and scientific account of the Egyptian campaigns, someone shouted: "Stow all that history book, and tell us about Gordon."

Instantly Rupert took fire, for Gordon was his favourite hero, the man whom he had known, loved and revered above all other men. He began to tell them about Gordon, about his glorious and desperate enterprise undertaken at the request of the Government, about his splendid fight against overwhelming odds, whilst sick at heart he awaited the relief which was sent too late; about that journey to save him in which he, Rupert, had shared, about the details of his martyr-death. Then, quite forgetting the occasion and whom he had come to support, he broke into a really eloquent tirade against those whom he considered to be responsible for the desertion of Gordon.

To finish up with, in answer to the suggestion of a voice in the audience that Gordon was not really dead, he actually quoted some well-known lines of poetry which he had by heart:

> "He will not come again, whate'er our need,
> He will not come, who is happy, being freed
> From the deathly flesh and perishable things,
> And lies of statesmen and rewards of kings,"

and then suddenly sat down amidst a tempest of cheers, mingled with cries of "Shame!" in which the whole room joined.

"Great Heavens!" said Dick fiercely, to his agent, "I believe that speech will lose us the election."

"Shouldn't wonder," answered the agent grimly. "Whatever did you get him here for? Better have stuck to the party patter."

Meanwhile a man, standing on a form, bawled out:

"And is them the beggars as you wishes us to vote for, master?"

Whereon followed what the local paper (luckily for Rupert his remarks were reported nowhere else) described as "great confusion," which culminated in something like a free fight.

In the midst of all this tumult, Dick, who was beside himself with passion, forced his way to Rupert, and almost shaking his fist in his face, shouted at him:

"Damn you! You did that on purpose. You've lost me the seat, but sooner or later I'll be even with you, you canting hypocrite—"

He got no further, for next instant Rupert's heavy right hand fell upon his shoulder and forced him to a chair.

"You don't know what you are saying," he said; "but speak like that again, and I'll throw you off the platform."

Then Dick, feeling that iron grip still upon his shoulder, was silent.

Here we may close the account of this curious scene, which once more showed the undesirability of invoking the aid of inexperienced and too honest persons at party meetings. To Dick the matter was serious enough, but to Edith's surprise, Lord Devene, whom she had thought would be angry, was intensely amused. Indeed, he went so far as to say that whether Dick got in or not, that one delightful story was worth the cost of the entire campaign.

When Rupert came to understand what he had done, needless to say he showed much penitence, and wrote a letter of apology to Dick, in which he "regretted having spoken the truth about Gordon in the excitement of the moment," and gave him leave, if he wished, "to publish this letter." Of this kind offer Dick did not avail himself. Under advice, however, he wrote back, saying sarcastically that the fault was his, who should have remembered that "distinguished men of action were rarely adepts at public speaking, and could not be expected to understand the exigencies of party affairs, which seldom made it desirable to drag the last veil from Truth, however pure and beautiful she might be." He concluded by apologising, in his turn, for any words that *he* might have spoken "in the excitement of the moment."

Thus, outwardly, at any rate, matters were patched up between them; still Dick did not forget his promise to be even sooner or later, or indeed the weight of Rupert's hand, of which his shoulder showed traces for many a day.

As for the end of the contest, the Devene money and interest prevailed at last, Dick being returned triumphantly with a small but sufficient majority of fifteen votes, reduced to thirteen on a recount. A few days later he took his seat in the House, where he was enthusiastically received by his party, to which the winning of this election was of consequence.

Dick had not very long to wait for his first opportunity of "coming even" with Rupert. As it chanced, on the 11th of April, two days before the marriage, he met and fell into conversation with Lord Southwick in the lobby of the House.

"By the way," said his lordship, "rather a pity that Ullershaw is just going to be married; we have got a job that would exactly suit him."

"What is that?" asked Dick, pricking up his ears.

"Oh! a man is wanted who knows those rascally Arab sheiks who live about the frontier at Wady-Halfa—secret service mission, to get round them privately, you know; I can't tell you the details, not that I think you would give me away to your people. The officer sent must be thoroughly acquainted with Arabic, and with the beastly manners and customs of the natives. Ullershaw's name came up at once as the very man, but I said that I was going to his wedding in two days, so as we couldn't think of anyone else, the matter was left over till to-morrow afternoon."

"When would he have to start?" asked Dick.

"At once, the thing is urgent; on Friday by the Brindisi mail, about seven o'clock in the evening, and you see he is to be married that afternoon. It's a thousand pities, as it would have been a great chance for him and for us too."

Dick thought a moment and light came to him.

"My cousin Ullershaw is a curious fellow," he said, "and I am not by any means certain that he would let his marriage stand in the way of duty, if it were put to him like that. How long would this mission take?"

"Oh! he could be back here in three months, but—er—you know—er—it would not be entirely devoid of risk. That's why we must have someone whose nerve can be really relied on."

"Ullershaw likes risks. As you say, it would suit him down to the ground. Look here, Lord Southwick! why don't you give him the chance? It would be kind of you. It's a shame to take away a fellow's opportunities because he commits the crime of getting married, and matrimonial bliss will generally keep three months. Send for him and ask him. At any rate, he will appreciate the compliment."

"Don't think I should if I had only been married an hour or two," said Lord Southwick. "However, the public service must be considered, so I will hear what my chief says. Where will a wire find him?"

Dick gave the address, and as an afterthought added that of Lord Devene in Grosvener Square, where it occurred to him that Rupert would very likely be on the following afternoon, suggesting that it would be wise to send any telegram in duplicate.

"Very well," said the Under-Secretary, as he made a note of the addresses. "I will settle it one way or another to-morrow afternoon; shan't get the chance before," and he turned to go.

"One word," broke in Dick. "I shall take it as a favour if you don't mention my name in connection with this matter. Of course I want to do him a good turn, but there is no knowing how the lady will take it, and I might get wigged afterwards."

"All right," answered Lord Southwick, with a laugh; "I'll remember."

"I don't think that Edith would see spending her honeymoon amongst the savages of the Soudan," reflected Dick to himself, with a crooked little smile, as he made his way into the House. "'Not devoid of risk.' Yes, Rupert's friend, Gordon, went on a special mission to the Soudan, and did not come back."

. . . . . .

On the following afternoon about four o'clock, as Rupert was leaving his mother's house to see Edith in Grosvenor Square, where she had taken up her abode, a messenger put a telegram into his hand, which read:

"Come to the War Office at once. Must speak with you upon very important business. Will wait here till five.

"SOUTHWICK."

Wondering what he was wanted for, Rupert told his cabman to drive to Pall Mall, and within half an hour of the receipt of the telegram sent in his card. Presently he was shown, not to the Under-Secretary's room, but into another, where he found the Secretary of State, and with him, Lord Southwick.

"Prompt, very prompt, I see, Colonel Ullershaw," said the former; "an excellent quality in an officer. Now sit down and I will just go over the main points of this business. If you undertake it, Lord Southwick will explain the details afterwards. You know the Wady-Halfa district and the Shillook Arabs and their headmen, don't you, and you can speak Arabic well, can't you? Also you have had diplomatic experience, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir, to all four questions," answered Rupert.

"Very good. These Shillooks have been giving a lot of trouble, raiding and killing people about Abu-Simbel and so forth. According to our reports, which you can see afterwards,

they have been stirred up by a rascal call Ibrahim, the Sheik of the Sweet Wells. Do you know him?"

"Yes, sir," replied Rupert, with a little smile, "he threatened to murder me the other day."

"I can quite believe it. Now see here. We are advised that several of these Shillook chiefs, including the one who has the most influence, are getting tired of the Khalifa and his little ways, and are, in short, open to treat, if only they can be got at by someone whom they know and have their palms well-greased. Now, for various reasons, the Egyptian Government does not wish to send an embassy to them, or any officer who is at present on the spot. You see the Khalifa would hear of it at once and might come down on them. What is wanted is an envoy travelling apparently on his own business, or if it is feasible, disguised as an Arab, who will slip through to them quietly and arrange a treaty. I need not say that, whoever did this satisfactorily, would earn the gratitude of the Egyptian Government, and would not be overlooked at the proper time. Now, Colonel Ullershaw, it has occurred to us that you are the very man for this affair, especially as you would take our complete confidence with you."

"I am much honoured," said Rupert, flushing at the compliment. "I should like the mission above all things, especially as I understand these men, one or two of whom are rather friends of mine. Indeed, the most influential of them accompanied me on a shooting expedition, and if anyone can move him, I think I can."

"There would be risks," put in Lord Southwick meaningly, for under the circumstances his kind heart misgave him.

"I don't mind risks, or, at least, I am accustomed to them, my lord," said Rupert quietly.

"There is another point," went on Lord Southwick. "Supposing that you were to fail—and failure must be contemplated—it might be needful, as no forward policy has been announced

at present, for those in authority not to take any official notice of the affair, which would possibly be used as a handle for attack upon them. You would, therefore, receive no written instructions, and the necessary money would be handed to you in gold."

"I quite understand," answered Rupert; "and so long as I am not thought the worse of in such an event, or made to suffer for it, it is all the same to me. Only," he added, suddenly remembering his forthcoming marriage, "when should I have to start?"

"By the evening mail to-morrow," said the Secretary of State, "for the conditions may change and will not bear delay."

Rupert's jaw fell. "I am to be married to-morrow at half-past two, sir."

The Secretary of State and Lord Southwick looked at each other; then the former spoke.

"We know that, Colonel Ullershaw, especially as one of us is to have the pleasure of attending your wedding. Still, in your own interests and what we are sure you will consider much more, in those of your country, we felt it right to give you the first offer of this delicate and responsible mission. Situated as you are, we do not urge you to accept it, especially as in the event of your refusal, for which we shall not in the least blame you, we have another officer waiting to take your place. At the same time, I tell you candidly that I do not think you will refuse, because I believe you to be a man who sets duty above every other earthly consideration. And now, sorry as I am to hurry you when there is so much to be considered on both sides, I must ask for your decision, as the other gentleman must absolutely have twenty-four hours in which to make his preparations."

Rupert rose and walked twice up and down the room, while they watched him — Lord Southwick very uneasily. At the second turn, he halted opposite to the Secretary of State.

"You used the word duty, sir," he said, "and therefore I have little choice in the matter. I accept the mission with which you have been pleased to honour me."

Lord Southwick opened his mouth to speak, but the Secretary of State cut him short.

"As Colonel Ullershaw has accepted, I do not think we need waste further time in discussion. Colonel Ullershaw, I congratulate you on the spirit that you have shown, which, as I thought it would, from your record and the judgment I formed of you at our previous interview, has led you to place your duty to your Queen and country before your personal happiness and convenience. I trust—and indeed I may say I believe—that our arrangement of this afternoon may prove, not the starting-point, it is true, but a very high step in a great and distinguished career. Good-day; I wish you all success. Lord Southwick will join you in his room presently and settle the details."

"It seems a little rough," said Lord Southwick, as the door closed behind Rupert, "on his marriage day and so forth. Supposing he got killed, as he very likely will."

"Many men, as good or better, have come to grief in doing their duty," answered his chief, a pompous individual who modelled himself upon the Spartans, at any rate where other people were concerned. "He must take his chance like the rest. Give him the K.C.B. and that sort of thing if he gets through, you know."

"K.C.B.s aren't much use to dead men, or their widows either," grumbled Lord Southwick. "I rather wish we hadn't talked to him about duty; you see, he is a quixotic sort of fellow, and really, as he isn't even to have a commission, there can't be any duty in the matter. He's only a kind of volunteer on a second-class, forlorn hope, to prepare the way by bribes and otherwise for an advance about which nothing is to be said, with the chance of being

repudiated as having exceeded his instructions if anything goes wrong."

"Really, Southwick," said his chief uneasily, "it is a pity all this didn't occur to you before you urged his employment —on the representations of his family, I understood. Anyway, it's settled now, and we can't go back on it. Besides, from a public point of view, it was important to get Ullershaw, who really is the only man, for that Major What's-his-name is an ignorant and conceited fellow, with nothing to recommend him except his knowledge of Arabic, who would have been sure to make a mess. With the example of what has happened in the past before our eyes, we can't commit ourselves in writing over a job of this sort. If he gets killed—he gets killed, and we are not to blame. If he comes through, he is made a K.C.B., and enjoys his honeymoon all the more. So don't let's bother about him. Is there anything else? No. Then good-bye; I'll be off to the House."

CHAPTER X

MARRIED

RUPERT left the War Office a very thoughtful man. He had spent nearly an hour with Lord Southwick, going into the details of his mission, of which he now realised the danger and complexity, for it was one of those fantastic embassies which seem easy enough to men in authority at home who are not called upon to execute them in person. All this he did not mind, however, for it appealed to his love of adventure; moreover, he had good hopes of bringing the thing to a successful issue, and understood the importance of its object, namely, to facilitate an ultimate advance against the Khalifa, and to help to checkmate Osman Digna, the chief who was making himself unpleasantly active in the neighbourhood of Suakim.

But what would Edith say? And on the very day of their marriage. The luck was hard! He drove to Grosvenor Square, but Edith was trying on her wedding dress and would not see him. She sent down a note to say that it would be most unlucky, adding that she had waited for him an hour and a half, and at last was obliged to go upstairs as the dressmaker could not stay any longer.

So he went on home, for he had to change his clothes and escort his mother to Grosvenor Square where, somewhat against her will, she was to dine and sleep. It was not till they were in the carriage that he found an opportunity of telling her what had occurred.

Mrs. Ullershaw was dismayed: she was overwhelmed. Yet

how could she blame him? All she could say was—that it seemed very unfortunate, and she supposed that instead of going to Paris, Edith would accompany him to Egypt. Then they arrived at Grosvenor Square, and further conversation became impossible.

They were early, and Rupert sent a message to Edith to say that he wished to speak to her in Lady Devene's boudoir. Presently she arrived beautifully dressed, and began at once to reproach him for not having called in the afternoon as he promised.

"You will forgive me when you know why," he answered and blurted out the whole story.

She listened in astonishment, then said:

"Am I to understand that you are going off to the Soudan to-morrow, three hours after our marriage?"

"Yes, yes, dear. I had no choice; it was put to me as a matter of duty, and by the Secretary of State himself. Also, if I had refused, I am sure that it would have been remembered against me; and as you know, it is important now that I should get on, for your sake."

"Men are generally supposed to have duties towards their wives," she answered, but in a softer tone, for his remark about his career appealed to her.

He was right. Edith considered it very important that he should get on.

Also, now that she came to think of it, this swift and sudden separation would, after all, be no overwhelming blow to her. She seemed to have seen plenty of Rupert lately, and was quite willing to postpone that continual and more intimate relationship which it is the object of marriage to establish. Had she been what is called in love, it would doubtless be different, but Edith's bosom glowed with no such ardours, of which, she reflected, Rupert had enough for both of them. The obvious conclusion was that it is quite as easy to respect, admire, and even sympathise with a spouse in the Soudan as

with one living in London. Then as she was preparing herself to admit, as grudgingly as possible, that this change might be for the best, however much it tore her feelings, a new idea occurred to her. Probably Rupert expected that she would accompany him at twenty-four hours' notice

"It is dreadfully sad to be separated so soon," she said, with a little sob. "I suppose that I could not come with you?"

Rupert's face brightened.

"Well," he said, "you could, but of course there are difficulties; not much time to get ready; hot season beginning and the cholera outbreak that is really bad in Cairo and Alexandria, at one of which I should have to leave you."

"I can't pretend, Rupert dear, that heat agrees with me, or that I should enjoy getting the cholera, which I am sure I should, for I always catch things, but at the same time," Edith answered, looking at him with her sweet eyes, "I am perfectly willing to take the risk if you think I could be the slightest comfort or help to you."

"Comfort, yes; help, no, rather in the way," he muttered more to himself than to her.

For a struggle was going on in Rupert's mind. He positively could not bear the idea of parting with his wife almost at the church door. It was a bitter disappointment to him, as it must be to any man who marries from motives of affection, and the very thought of it caused his heart to ache physically. At the same time, he knew that Edith did feel heat, for his mother had told him this, and the cholera was so virulent that he heard by letter from Cairo that every European there, also at Port Said and Alexandria, especially women and children, who could afford or contrive to get away, had done so. Could he take this utterly unacclimatised English lady thither at such a time, just out of selfishness, and at the beginning of the hot weather? Supposing she fell ill! Supposing anything happened to her! He turned white at the mere thought of such a thing, and said:

"Edith, I don't want to disappoint you, but I think you had better not come till the summer is over and we are clear of the cholera. Then you can join me in Cairo, or more probably I shall be able to fetch you."

"It must be as you wish, dear," she answered, with a sigh, "for I can't set up my opinion against yours. I would offer to come out with you, at any rate as far as Egypt, only I am afraid it would be a quite useless expense, as I am such a miserable traveller that even the train makes me sick, and as for the sea—! Then there would be the returning all alone, and no arrangements made about your mother into the bargain. However, don't you think I might try it?"

"Yes—no, I suppose not, it seems absurd. Oh, curse the Secretary of State and Lord Southwick, and the whole War Office down to the cellars, with all the clans of the Shillooks thrown in. I beg your pardon, I shouldn't speak like that before you, but really it is enough to drive a man mad," and yielding for once to an access of his honest passion, Rupert swept her up into his strong arms and kissed her again and again.

Edith did not resist, she even smiled and returned about one per cent. of his endearments. Still this tempestuous end to that fateful conversation did nothing to make her more anxious to reverse the agreement at which they had arrived, rather the contrary indeed. Yet, and the conviction smote her with a sense of shame as it came suddenly home to her, the worst of it was, she knew that if Dick had stood in Rupert's place, and Dick had been unexpectedly ordered to Egypt, not the sea, nor the heat, nor even the cholera which she feared and loathed, would have prevented her from accompanying him.

At dinner the whole thing came out, except the details of Rupert's mission, which, of course, were secret, and it cannot be said that the news added to the gaiety of the meal. Although his appetite did not seem to be affected, Dick was

most sympathetic, especially to Edith. Lord Devene said little, but looked vexed and thought the more; Edith sat *distraite* and silent; Rupert was gloomy, while Mrs. Ullershaw, who felt this upset keenly for her own sake as well as her son's, seemed to be nigh to tears. Only Tabitha was emphatic and vigorous, for no one else seemed to have the heart to discuss the matter. Like Rupert she objurgated the War Office, and especially the man, whoever he might be, who had conceived the idea of sending him at such a time. "A schemeful wretch"—"One without shame," she called him, translating, as was her custom, from the German in which she thought. Nor was the definition inaccurate, while the vigour with which she launched it caused Dick to hope sincerely that Lord Southwick would remember his promise to conceal his private but important share in the transaction.

"Ach! my dear Edith," she went on, "it is awkward for you also, for however will you get ready to start for the East by to-morrow night?"

This was a bomb-shell, and its explosion nearly shook Edith out of her wonted composure.

"I am not going," she said, in a hesitating voice. "Dick does—"

"Dick! What has Dick to do with it?" exclaimed her ladyship, pouncing on her like a heavy cat on a mouse.

"Nothing, I assure you," broke in Dick himself, in alarm. "She meant Rupert."

"Ach! I am glad to hear it. It does seem to me that there is too much Dick about Edith, even when she is getting married; yes, and everywhere."

"I really think that Tabitha is right; there is too much Dick," reflected her husband, but aloud he said nothing, only sipped his champagne and watched the play.

Nor, although he looked daggers, did Dick say anything, for he was afraid of Lady Devene, and respected the acumen which was hid beneath her stout and placid exterior. Then

with his usual chivalry, Rupert, ignoring the Dick side of the business, came to the rescue and explained that he, and he alone, was responsible for Edith's stopping in England, giving the reasons with which we are acquainted.

Lady Devene listened patiently as she always did to Rupert while he blundered through his story.

When it was finished, Edith, who had found time to collect herself, said in a somewhat offended voice:

"You see now you were unjust to me, Tabitha. I—I wished to go."

Next moment she wished something else, namely, that she had remained silent, for Lady Devene answered with calm conviction:

"Indeed—is it so? Then I am sorry you have not more influence with him. It would have been better that you should go. Why did you tell him that you were afraid of the hot sun and of the cholera sickness? He would not have thought of it himself, who is afraid of nothing. Come, the subject is unpleasant; let us go upstairs and talk of the wedding presents."

So they went and not too soon, for what between doubt, anger, and a guilty conscience, Edith was on the verge of tears.

That night after Rupert had departed Edith and Lord Devene spoke together in the library.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he said to her. "First, tell me, who engineered this mission of Rupert's? Did you?"

"No, indeed," she answered, with passion, filled for once with conscious innocence. "How can you accuse me of such a thing?"

"I am glad to hear it," he replied, taking no notice of her indignation. "Then, as I thought, it was Dick. Be quiet and listen! Rupert's employment was suggested more than a week ago. I heard about it in the House of Lords and put a stopper on it. I know that Dick saw Southwick yesterday, because the latter mentioned it in a note to me, since

which time the idea has revived. You can form your own conclusions."

"It is impossible," broke in Edith. "He would never be so mean."

"You have a high idea of your cousin, whom, for my part, I think capable of anything low. Well, it does not matter, it is done and cannot be undone. Now of course Tabitha was right. I admire her power of getting to the heart of things. Whatever may have passed between you, it was you who would not go to Egypt, not Rupert who would not take you. You know well enough that you could have made him take you; you could have refused to be left behind; but you talked about sea-sickness and heat and cholera—he let it all out at table."

Edith sat silent. As other women had found before her, it was useless to argue with this remorseless man, especially when he had truth upon his side.

"Now," he went on, "why did you refuse to go? Oh, pray save yourself the trouble of invention. I will tell you. As Tabitha says, because there is still too much Dick. You do not like the man who is be going to be your husband, Edith; you shrink from him; oh, I have seen you clench your hand and set your lips when he touched you. You are glad of this opportunity to postpone your married life. It has even occurred to you," and he bent over her and looked her in the eyes, "that from such missions as this, men often do not come back, as it has occurred to Dick. They pass away in a blaze of glory and become immortal, like Gordon, or they vanish silently, unnoted, and unremembered, like many another man almost as brave and great as he."

Edith could bear it no longer, but sprang to her feet with a cry of: "Not that! Not that!"

"Not that, as yet, but all the rest, eh?"

"If so, am I responsible?" she answered. "Did I make my own heart, and who forced me into this marriage?"

"Oh, please understand me, Edith. I do not in the least blame you for disliking Rupert; indeed it is a sentiment in which you have my hearty sympathy, for no one can dislike him more than I do, or, I may add, with better cause. As for the rest, I suggested the marriage to you, I did not force you into that marriage. I still suggest it for the most excellent reasons which far over-ride petty personal likes or dislikes, but still I do not force you. Make this mission of Rupert's an excuse for postponing it if you will, after which it can quietly drop out of sight. Only then, remember, that a document which I have signed to-day goes into the fire, or rather two documents, a settlement and a will. Remember that Dick goes out of this house, and as a consequence, out of the House of Commons also and into the gutter which Nature has fitted him to adorn. And lastly, remember that henceforth you make your own way in the world and provide for your own necessities. Now you will understand that I force you to nothing, for where that precious organ which they call their hearts are concerned, high-minded women—like yourself—will not let such material trifles weigh with them."

Edith stood still as a statue. Then drawing the rose from her bosom she began to tear it to pieces, petal by petal. Lord Devene lit a cigarette, and waited till the rose was stripped down to its calyx.

"Well," he asked, "does the oracle declare itself? I daresay it is as likely to be correct as any other," and he glanced at the petals on the floor and the stalk in her hand.

"Why are you so cruel to me?" Edith moaned, thereby acknowledging that she had found her master, and letting the stalk fall. "It is not manly to mock a defenceless woman who has many troubles."

A shade of compunction passed across his steely face, of affection even.

"Forgive me," he said, "I do not wish to hurt you, but we are people of the world, and have to deal with facts, not

with sentiments and fancies. I put the facts clearly, that is all."

"What are your facts?" went on Edith. "That I am in love with Dick Learmer. I deny it. I am not, and never have been; but this is true, that he does in some way attract me, one side of me, even when with my mind I dislike and despise him. That I detest Rupert whom I am going to marry. I deny it; but it is true that he repels me, one side of me, even when with my mind I appreciate and honour him, who is worth all of us, except perhaps Tabitha. As a father or a brother I should adore Rupert Ullershaw. Now you think that I am going to marry him for the money and the prospects, and from fear of your anger—it is not altogether so. I do not know if you will understand me, or even if I can make myself intelligible. But I tell you that although it would ruin me, for I know you keep your word, I would do what you suggest and postpone this marriage as a preliminary to breaking it off, were it not for one thing. It is this. I feel as though that personal aversion which I have is but accidental and temporary, that a time may and must come when it will break down and vanish, and that then I shall love him as I desire to do, with my heart, my body, and my soul."

Lord Devene stared at her.

"Curious and most interesting," he said. "No; that is not satire. I quite believe you, and I think it very likely that what you feel in yourself will come about—probably too late. Meanwhile, to deal with the evil of the present day, are you going to accompany him to Egypt or will you await the coming of this—this psychological change of the inner woman?"

Edith evidently had no spirit left to enable her to reply to this barbed shaft. She only said:

"I will offer again to go to Egypt with him. Indeed now I wish to go, away from all of you. And I wish, too, that I might die there, even of that horrid cholera,' she added fiercely. "But I tell you that I know Rupert, and that it is

now, as you say, too late. After that wretched scene at dinner he will never take me, because he will think that to do so would be to cast a reflection upon me, and to admit that it was I who did not wish to accompany him, not he who did not wish to take me."

"Possibly," answered Lord Devene. "I have always found the loosing of knots very difficult; the wise people are those who do not tie them."

Then she crept away to bed broken and sore-hearted. After she had gone Lord Devene smoked two more cigarettes. Next he sat down and drafted a letter with great care, which ultimately he copied out, directed to Colonel Ullershaw, and put away.

Here it may be stated that Edith proved to be absolutely right. Although he would have given nearly all he had to take her with him, when it was put to him on the morrow in the presence of Lord Devene, in spite of everything that Edith could say, Rupert positively refused to consent to her coming, and for the exact reasons which she foresaw would sway him. He was too loyal to do anything which he thought would in the smallest degree asperse her. When Lord Devene intervened, moreover, he only answered haughtily that he was the best judge of the matter which concerned his wife and himself alone.

Thus, then, this question was finally decided.

. . . . . .

The impression left upon Rupert's mind by his wedding was hazy and tumultuous. Most of that morning he had been obliged to spend at the War Office arranging the details of his mission. Thence he rushed home to finish his packing, dress, and convey his luggage to Charing Cross, finally arriving at St. George's, Hanover Square, only a few minutes before the bride.

The best man, his old Indian friend whom he had gone to stay with on the day after his engagement, hustled him into a pew, scolding him for being late, telling him to put on his gloves and asking him what he had done with the ring, which was only discovered after great difficulty. Vaguely Rupert noticed that the place was crowded with fashionable-looking people, who all seemed to be staring at him, as he thought, because his hair was untidy, which it was. Then the organ began to play, and the fashionable congregation turned and stared down the aisle, while his friend trod on his foot, poked him in the ribs, and adjured him in a loud whisper to wake up and look alive, as the bride was coming.

He looked, and there, followed by her train of bridesmaids—tall, pale, lovely—white and wonderful in her shimmering satin and pearls, Edith floated towards him up the aisle like a vision out of heaven. From that moment Rupert saw nothing else, not even Lord Devene, who gave her away. The brilliant congregation, the robed bishop and clergymen, the fussy and ubiquitous best man, the smiling bridesmaids, the stony Lord Southwick, all vanished into space. Nothing remained save the pale, earnest face of Edith in which the eyes shone like stars at dawn. Nothing did he seem to hear save her whispered "I will."

It was over; he remembered signing a book, kissing his wife and his mother, and driving with the former in a fine carriage to Grosvenor Square. She asked him whether he had got his luggage safely to the station, and then it seemed that of a sudden, before he had even time to answer, they arrived at the house, where policemen were keeping a passage clear beneath an awning. As he helped Edith to descend from the carriage an old woman remarked audibly:

"Pore fellow, he don't know what he's in for!" which struck him as an unkind saying.

Then came the reception, a long, long ceremony, remarkable for the multitude of strange faces and for a room

set out with wedding gifts which were "numerous and costly." Champagne was drunk also, and the bride's heath proposed by Lord Southwick, who described her as one of the loveliest and most charming young ladies in London, a truth at which everyone cheered, for it was obvious. He ended with a panegyric on Rupert himself, briefly recapitulating his services and the distinctions which he had won, which were, he was convinced, only earnests of those greater distinctions that remained for him to win. Finally, he regretted that the call of duty, to which this gallant officer had never been able to turn a deaf ear, forced him to separate, he was glad to say for but a short while only, from his beautiful and new-wed wife.

Rupert replied, thanking the proposer and the company for their good wishes. He added that there were trials which all men had to face unexpectedly, and this early and sudden separation was one of the greatest that had come to him, especially as it had obliged him to refuse his wife's first request, that she might be allowed to accompany him to Egypt, which he was forced to do because of the cholera that was raging there.

Then he stopped, and Edith thanked him for his words with a grateful smile while the guests began to melt away. Dick sauntered up, beautifully arrayed, and remarking sympathetically that they had only three hours before the departure of the train, asked, in a voice loud enough to attract general attention, where they had finally decided to spend their honeymoon.

Edith drew herself up and answered: "Here in London when Rupert returns from the Soudan, or perhaps in Egypt," after which public announcement, until they were together in the carriage going to the station, her husband found it impossible to secure even a private word with her. Again the subtle Dick had succeeded in adding one more course to the wall which it was his evil aim to build between Rupert and his wife.

The one thing which always stood out in Rupert's mind

above the level of the grey and dim confusion of this marriage, like a black mountain-point from an evening mist, was his farewell to his mother. While he made his last preparations for his journey, finding that Edith was not with him, she came timidly to the room and sat by his side. Mrs. Ullershaw was sad, but strove to conquer her mood, or at any rate, to hide it, speaking cheerfully of the honour that had been done him by the Government and the advantage that he might hope for as a consequence. Rupert, too, strove to be cheerful, though the frost of gloom that fell on him, colder and yet more cold, nipped his heart and killed all joy. She felt it, and at length, poor, loving woman, her grief got the better of her and she burst into tears.

"Oh, why does not Edith accompany you?" she said. "I cannot bear to think of your going out there alone within three hours of your marriage. If only I could have had a little more time, ill and feeble as I am, I would have come with you as far as Cairo, for, my boy, my boy! how can I know that I shall ever see you again?"

Then after his manner Rupert turned and faced the situation, simply and plainly.

"You can't know, dearest mother," he said, "neither of us can know; but what does it matter? Sooner or later that separation must come, but fortunately we are both of us convinced that it will be the last. Even to-day when I should be so happy, I cannot pretend that the world satisfies me; indeed it seems as full of pains and troubles as ever, for things have gone wrong and my anxieties are increased. Well, very soon the world will pass from beneath our feet, and then, as you have taught me and I am sure, the true life begins. This I promise, as I promised you years ago, that while I live I will try to be honest and upright as you are, so that at the last we may be together again. If you go first, then wait for me, as, if I should be called away, I will wait for you."

She turned her streaming face towards him and smiled and

there was something in the smile that frightened and thrilled him, for it was not altogether of the earth.

"I know it," she whispered—"all, all. It is true, and I bless God who has tied us together everlastingly. They are calling you. Go, Rupert. No, I cannot come, I do not wish those people to see my grief. Go; and God's blessing and mine go with you, as they shall," and she laid her trembling hand upon his head in benediction while he knelt beside her.

Then he kissed her and they parted.

In the hall they were all waiting, Edith in the charming travelling-dress which she had designed for her going away. He said good-bye to them, Lord Devene remarking with a smile that he was afraid he was already beginning to find out that even matrimony, though it was said to have descended from on high, could not escape its share of shadow. Dick congratulated him warmly upon things in general and wished that he had his chance which, he was sure, would bring him every sort of good fortune, whereon Lady Devene muttered, "*Unberufen!*" and looked indignantly at Edith, and the saturnine butler, who, thrusting aside the footman, showed him to the carriage—for he was really attached to Rupert—muttered that he only hoped that he "should see him back alive out of them there savage parts."

The door of the carriage slammed, the footman, with his wedding favour still upon his breast, touched his hat and sprang to the box, the coachman waved his white beribboned whip, and the horses started forward into the gloom, for rain was falling heavily. So at last he was alone with Edith—for about ten minutes.

She took his hand affectionately, more she could not have done had she wished, since the passers-by stared idly at the blazoned, aristocratic-looking carriage and the horses and servants decked with wedding favours. She reminded him how they had driven together from the station when he arrived from the East, and said how strange it was that now she should

be driving with him to the station as his wife to see him off again to the East. Indeed she talked far more than he did whose heart felt too full for words, and who had looked forward for months to a very different departure with his bride. Suddenly he remembered that he had not given her the address to which she must write to him in Cairo, and the rest of their brief journey was occupied in his efforts to put it down as well as the jolting of the carriage would allow.

Then came the confusion of the station, where porters, thinking that they were a couple going away upon their honeymoon, and finding out his name from the coachman, rushed after him calling him "Colonel," or sometimes "My lord," and were ultimately much astonished to discover that he was travelling alone by the Brindisi mail. Everything was arranged at last, and the pair stood together forlornly at the door of his smoking carriage in which there were two other passengers. Then as the guard called to him to take his seat, the footman stepped forward, touched his hat again, and handed him a letter with the message that it was from his lordship, who said that there was no answer. Rupert thrust it into the pocket of his ulster, embraced his wife, who wiped her eyes with her handkerchief and tried to smile, and after another long minute which seemed an eternity of time, the great engine whistled and the train moved forward into the rain and the darkness.

Rupert sat still for a little, while the image of Edith standing alone upon the platform faded from his sight, waiting for the confusion of his mind to clear. Then he put his hand into his pocket to find his pipe, more from habit than from any desire to smoke, and in doing so, found something else — Lord Devene's letter, which he had forgotten.

What was *he* writing to him about, he wondered, as he broke the seal of many quarterings and began to read. This was the letter:

"My Dear Rupert,—When you told me that you had insured your life for £10,000 and settled the amount upon Edith, I intimated to you that I also proposed to make her a wedding present in money." ("So he did," thought Rupert, "I had forgotten all about it.") "I now write to say that I have carried out this arrangement. Under deed I have paid to her trustees, and settled to her separate use, the capital sum of £25,000, of which the interest will be paid to her quarterly, she having the right to dispose of the *corpus* by will in favour of anyone whom she may wish. In the event of her having children, however, it is to be divided in equal shares among them at her death."

"That's a lot," thought Rupert to himself. "I wonder why he gave her so much. Well, it will make her life easier." Then he went on with the letter and found the answer to his question.

"Perhaps you will wonder why I am so liberal, so I may as well tell you at once what possibly you have guessed; what, indeed, although *she* does not know it, you must learn sooner or later. Edith is my daughter."

These words seemed to stun Rupert. He felt the weight of the blow without appreciating its significance. Three times did he re-read them. Then at last their full meaning came home to him, and with it a knowledge that he must control himself, that he must say or do nothing violent, show no strong emotion even, for those two other men in the carriage, whose curiosity, it was clear, had been deeply excited concerning him, were watching him over the tops of their newspapers. He would read on and think afterwards.

"It is very possible that my late wife Clara, with whom you will remember you used to be friendly in your youth, may

have expressed to you, as she often did to others, her jealousy and hatred of Marian Bonnythorne. It was well-founded, though Clara, from whom I was practically separated for many years before her death, had no real cause to complain of the matter. Nor indeed had Bonnythorne, who, after a long course of neglect, deserted his wife to go into a monastery, leaving her to me to support. You will not wish for details, as my present action will assure you of the truth of what I write. Nor do I intend to make any excuses. I look back to my intimacy with Marian Bonnythorne, of whom I was truly fond and who was fond of me, as the pleasantest episode in an existence that, notwithstanding my worldly advantages, I have not found delightful. I am very glad that Edith was born, as it is probable that she will prove the only issue whom I shall leave, and the fact of her illegitimacy does not in the least affect me, who have no high opinion of our matrimonial system. I regard Edith, indeed, with as much affection as though I could acknowledge her to be my child before the world, which, for her sake, I cannot do.

"To proceed. It will now be clear to you why I forwarded this marriage between you and my daughter by every means in my power; why also I have kept the truth from both of you, fearing lest, did you know it, some of the absurd notions of which I observe you to be a victim, might lead you to be mean enough to break your engagement.

"I have no reason, Rupert, to hold you in special regard. Of one matter I will not speak; indeed, though not of your own will—if you had one in those days—you did me a good turn there. I bear you no grudge, as I trust you will bear me none when you fold up this letter. But there is another cause for our want of sympathy. I have earnestly desired to have sons of my own, an inbred weakness which I confess has become almost a mania, but when I look for those sons, in their place I see *you*. You will inherit the rank and great wealth which should have belonged to them. It is therefore obvious and

natural that I should wish my only child to share these with you, and her children to take them in their turn. One word more.

"I respect you. I think you have grown into a good man according to your lights, although they are not mine, and you have done what none of us have succeeded in doing before, earned yourself an honourable position by your own exertions. Therefore I can with confidence and satisfaction leave Edith in your hands, especially as you have chanced to become earnestly attached to her, and as otherwise she would in all probability have fallen into those of that scamp, Dick Learmer, a man of whom I warn you to beware.—Very truly yours,

"DEVENE.

"*P.S.*—I am exceedingly sorry that this contretemps about your being ordered to Egypt should have happened at such a moment. You should have insisted upon Edith accompanying you, for *carpe diem* and its joys is an excellent motto, and it is unwise to leave behind you a wife who is only so in name. But as usual, your own obstinacy and quixotic notions have stood in your way, since when Edith offered to go this morning, you forbade her to do so in my presence. I could say no more, and you must abide the issue. Believe me, I earnestly wish your safe return for both your sakes.

"D."

Rupert replaced the letter in its envelope and thrust it into his pocket. There was nothing to be said; nothing to be done. Fate had him in its net. But oh! how would it all end? He asked it of the night; he asked it of his own heart; but no answer came. Only the beat of the wheels as they rushed forward shaped themselves to words and said to him:

"You have married Devene's daughter. Poor man! Poor man! Poor man!"

That was their song through England, France, and Italy. Then the thudding of the screw took up its burden, and chanted it until he saw the low coasts of Egypt outlined before him and set his face to duty once again.

CHAPTER XI

AN OFFERING TO THE GODS

ABOUT six weeks after he had said farewell to Edith at Charing Cross Station, Rupert found himself once more upon the banks of the Nile and staring by the light of the full moon at the colossal statues that sit upon the façade of Abu-Simbel. So much had happened to him since last he contemplated their gentle, stony smile that its unvarying sameness struck him as irritating and almost strange. Somehow, he expected that they would look different.

Certainly Rupert looked different; so much so, that if they had been endowed with remembrance, the statues would scarcely have known him again, for now he was dressed in the flowing robes of an Arab sheik. These could not, as he knew, suffice to disguise his Western origin. Still, in a desert land, devastated by war, through which few travelled, they might, he hoped, render him less conspicuous to the keen eyes of wandering Arabs, or even of spies surveying his little caravan from the shelter of a bush or the top of a sand-hill a mile or two away.

For the rest, it was his intention, if accused, to declare himself a European, of the German race, making a journey to sell merchandise to certain sheiks whom he had been informed were anxious to buy at good prices. For this purpose he had a licence to trade, signed by the authorities at Cairo, in favour of one Mahommed, a German who had turned Mussulman, and whose European name was Carl Gottschalk. This merchandise of his, which was loaded

upon eight camels, consisted of cotton goods, sugar, copper wire, and oddly enough, a certain quantity of guns and ammunition, also what was a strange possession for a trader setting out upon a trip, about £1,000 in gold. All these things, it is scarcely necessary to explain, were in reality designed to be used as presents to propitiate the wavering frontier chiefs, to whom he was the accredited envoy, and to dispose them to assist instead of opposing the forward movement which was then in contemplation as a first step in the re-conquest of the Soudan.

He had started some days before from Derr, opposite to Korosko, with his caravan of about thirty camels and some five-and-twenty trained and trusted men, most of them Soudanese, all of whom had seen military service, although they were disguised as drivers and attendants. At Abu-Simbel he was to receive certain reports from spies, who had been sent on to collect information, and then to strike out into the desert to fulfil the object of his mission.

In order that he might be able to think over the hazardous details of the work before him in quiet—for even at night the grumbling of the camels about his camp, which was pitched a few hundred yards away, disturbed him—Rupert entered the hypostyle hall of the rock-hewn temple and seated himself upon the dry sand that had drifted into it, resting his back against the third of the northern row of the huge effigies of Rameses II., which are clothed in the wrappings of Osiris and bear his crook and scourge. Here the darkness was relieved only by a faint ray of moonlight, which crept up the solemn, central aisle, and the silence was that of a tomb.

When he had been in the place for half an hour or so, weary with thinking, Rupert began to doze, but was awakened suddenly by the sound of feet moving over sand, and looking up, saw two figures glide past him, one of them somewhat taller than the other, to vanish into the recesses of the temple so quietly that they might well have been ghosts of its ancient

worshippers. For a while he remained still, wondering who these were, and what they could be doing in such a place at midnight, or near it, when all men slept.

At first he thought that he would follow them, then remembered that he was not seeking adventures, and that, after all, it was no business of his to interfere with them, so long as they left him alone. Therefore, being now wide awake again, he pursued his cogitations, purposing to rise presently and return to his camp to sleep. A few minutes later, ten perhaps, chancing to glance up the great temple, Rupert perceived far, far away, a tiny star of light. From where he was it looked no stronger than that of a distant planet in a cloudy sky, or of a glow-worm amongst the tall grasses of a bank. This light roused his curiosity, as he guessed that it must have to do with the figures that had passed him. Probably they were treasure-seekers, he reflected, engaged in digging in the sanctuary, which in the day-time they did not dare to do. They might even have found the secret of the crypt that he always believed to exist under Abu-Simbel, wherein very possibly its gold and silver treasures were still hidden from the eyes of men. The thought excited him who, as Edith had good cause to know, was an ardent Egyptologist.

For a moment Rupert hesitated, then remembering that there were but two of them and that he was armed, yielded to impulse, or to the pressure of Destiny, and began very cautiously to creep towards that light. Down the long hall he went, feeling his way from column to column, through the doorway to the smaller hall, and guided by the star of flame, down that also into a narrow transverse chamber that gives access to the central sanctuary and the apartments on its either side. At the entrance of the holy place he stopped, and cautiously looked round the projecting rock that once had supported its massive door. Then—for this sanctuary is not large—he saw a very strange and interesting sight.

On the square, solid altar where, for more than a thousand

years, offerings had once been made to the gods of Egypt, and to the great Rameses, who, when he hewed this temple, placed himself among their number, stood a lamp, having at the back of it a piece of rock fallen from the ceiling, and set edgeways in such a fashion as to throw the most of its light forward. This light struck upon the shattered, seated figures of the four gods that were worshipped here, and still remain staring down their desolated shrine: Ptah, Ammon-Ra, Rameses himself, and Harmachis, god of Dawn, crowned with the emblem of the disc of the sun. Also they struck upon what, under the circumstances, seemed more wonderful even than they are, the figures of two women standing face to face on either side of the line of gods, to whom they appeared to be making invocations.

Rupert knew one of them at once—it was the old gipsy Bakhita, of whom, until he passed her house that afternoon and noticed some fine white dromedaries tethered by it, he had not thought for months, not since the night of his betrothal indeed, when she thrust her shadow among the company gathered at Devene to welcome the New Year. She was clothed in a dark, clinging gown, with a close-fitting wimple upon her head, that gave her the air of a priestess, which, indeed, as he guessed at once, was the part she played. But on her Rupert's glance did not linger long, for it flew to her companion and there remained.

She was a young woman—perhaps two- or three-and-twenty years of age—small, delicate, slender, but beautifully fashioned, and so light in colour as to be almost white. For dress she wore thin draperies — so thin that her rounded shape and limbs were visible through them, and so white that they gleamed like snow. About her waist was a girdle of silver, and set upon the dark, curling hair that rested stiffly on her shoulders, like that of some sculptured Egyptian queen, a circlet of gold, from which rose the symbol of the sun's disc, and in front of it the hooded asp.

Rupert saw these things and gasped, as well he might, for unless his eyes deceived him or he dreamed, he beheld what no man had seen for more than a thousand years—one of the royal race of Egypt making offering to her gods. There could be no doubt about it. The dress, though simplified, was the same, and the *uræus* on her brow—which none that were not of the direct family of the Pharaohs, or tied to him as lawful wife, would have dared to wear—told their own tale. Moreover, in one hand she held a bowl of glass, and in the other a jar of alabaster, and from the jar she poured a libation into the bowl and offered it to Harmachis, saying, in a sweet voice, and in Arabic, Bakhita prompting her to the words:

"Grant, I pray thee, O thou clothed with the sun, which is the symbol of the spirit, a safe journey to me, by blood the last of thy priestesses, and to this woman, thy worshipper, who is of my kin!"

As she spoke she turned her head, and the light of the lamp fell full upon her face, and it was lovely as a flower, clothed with a kind of beauty that was new to Rupert, for never had he seen its like. The large eyes—dark, liquid, and lustrous—the broad and noble brow, the lips somewhat full and red, in type purely Eastern, the fine-cut nose spreading a little at the nostrils, the rounded, childish cheeks, the firm yet dimpled chin, were all set like a framed picture in the straight-trimmed, formal masses of that curling hair. Taken separately, there was nothing wonderful about these features, but together, animated and illumined by that sweet, slow smile and the tremulous mystery of the proud yet pleading eyes, ah! who had ever seen their fellow?

In his anxiety to witness more of this most fascinating spectacle, Rupert thrust himself further forward. In so doing the hand that supported the weight of his body slipped on the rock, against which his signet-ring grated, making a loud noise in the utter silence of that dead place.

Bakhita, whose ears were quick as those of any fox, heard

it, and wheeling round, sprang to the lamp, snatched it from the altar, and rushed to the doorway. Rupert attempted to retreat across the corridor, purposing to take refuge in one of the side-chambers which open out of the inner hall. It was too late. She was on him, so realising the danger of leaving his back exposed, he turned, and they came face to face.

"Bakhita," he said, "it is I," for already a knife flashed in her hand.

She let her arm fall and scanned him.

"Rupert Bey!" she exclaimed. "So you are back again. Well, I have heard, also I always knew that you would come. But what do you here disguised as an Arab sheik? And why do you spy upon us at our rites? Oh! I tell you that had you not been Rupert Bey, by now you were a dead man."

Meanwhile, the younger woman, who had followed Bakhita, not knowing the cause of the disturbance, actually stumbled against him, then recoiling, stood still, and in her amazement slowly let her hand sink, thereby emptying upon his feet the contents of the bowl she held.

It was a very curious sight—this big Englishman in his Arab robe, standing quite still and upright, lest any show of fear should bring about a knife-thrust, and the beautiful Eastern woman in her sacred but diaphanous garb, wearing the disc and the imposing emblem of Egyptian royalty, and slowly pouring her involuntary libation upon his feet. Its setting also was strange. All around were the great columns and carven walls, and staring down at them from beyond the altar those mutilated but still awful gods.

"Put up that knife," he said, "and come into this side-chamber and I will tell you."

Bakhita stooped, and lifting a dark, camel-hair cloak from where it lay on the floor near to the altar, threw it about the shoulders of her companion, drawing its hood over her head. Then taking her by the hand, she said to Rupert:

"We follow!" and led the way between the columns to

the first chamber that opened on their right. It was a rough place, which probably in past ages had served as a store-room of the temple, peopled with many bats that flittered to and fro unceasingly, uttering thin cries. Setting down the lamp upon one of the stone benches or tables with which it was furnished on either side, she said: "We are your servants, Rupert Bey," adding, with her grim smile: "Have we not poured a libation to you?" and she looked at his feet wet with the contents of the glass bowl.

"It was not to me that you came here to pour libations," he answered, laughing. "Now tell me, friend. What was this lady doing?" and he bowed towards the younger woman, "for never have I been more curious to learn anything upon earth."

"Tell us first what you were doing, Rupert Bey? Nay, not about your business—I know all that—but why you followed us into the sanctuary?"

"For the same reason that you followed me into the temple—by pure accident. I was seated at the feet of one of the columns when you passed me, though who you were I did not guess. Afterwards, seeing the light, I came to look. That is my story; now for yours."

"Mea," she said, "tell him what you will. He has seen; but he is a true man, and I think will keep our secrets if he promises, especially as he knows that if he does not, then I will do my best to kill him."

Rupert laughed, for he was not frightened at Bakhita's threats. Meanwhile the lady called Mea was searching his face with those wondrous eyes of hers. Then she spoke in a low, rich voice and in English, not Arabic.

"Will you promise to be true to me, Gentleman?" she asked, in a curious idiom and speaking with a strong accent.

"If you mean not to tell your secrets, certainly!" he answered, smiling.

"My secrets, they are very little ones, only babies so high,"

and she held her hand near to the floor. "You see, Bey, I live far out in the desert, and my people and I, we still old Egyptians though we cannot read their writings, and only remember a little—a very little, about the gods and what they mean. Now, dressed like my mothers when they pray, I come here to-night with Bakhita, my aunt, your friend, to make offering to that god with the sun upon his head, because I in much danger and wish to ask him to bring me safe back to my own place."

"Where, then, do you come from, lady?"

"I? I come from school—Mission School at Luxor. I tired of living in the stupid dark, so I go there two year ago to learn all about the white people, and the English talk, and—" she added with triumph, "you hear, I learned him."

"Yes," he said; "you learned him very well. And what else did you learn?"

"Much. Reading, writing, 'rithmetic, gography, history of U.S.A., British Empire, and old Egypt, especially old Egypt, because I one of him, though they no know that who think me common girl, no one know that but you, Bey, who catch me in act of worship. I learn religion too, and think it very good, much the same as mine, only different."

"Are you a Christian, then, lady?" asked Rupert again.

She shook her head, causing the disc and little golden snake she wore to glisten in the lamp-light.

"No, not quite Christian, only half, not baptized. I afraid if baptized, make old fellows—" and she pointed towards the gods in the sanctuary, "angry and bring bad luck."

"I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious," said Rupert, quoting aloud to himself.

She looked puzzled, then her face brightened as the meaning of the last word came home to her.

"No," she said, "not superstitious like beastly Mahommedan, only afraid. That why I come here in not decent night-dress," and she held out her little foot naked

except for the sandal, and again shook her head as though in regret for a state of affairs over which she had no control.

Rupert laughed loudly, causing the bats which had settled to flitter from the roof again, and Mea, who seemed to be a merry little soul, joined in his laughter. This made old Bakhita angry, and she reproved them both in a stern voice.

"Do not cackle here," she said, in Arabic, "in the very house of the gods, though it is true that to one of you they are no gods, and already the other has a foot set in that same path," and she glanced wrathfully at Mea. "Listen, Bey! I make a request of you. I do not ask for myself, who am old and ugly, but for this lady. I have heard that you ride to-morrow at night-fall. Now our road is yours, for I know the sheiks to whom you go. Give us and our two servants leave to ride with you. We have good camels of our own," and she looked at him with anxious eyes.

"Why do you want my escort, and whither?" he asked doubtfully.

"Why? For this reason. Do you remember the Sheik Ibrahim, he of the Sweet Wells? Yes, I see you do. Well, he is an old enemy of our house. He asked for the lady here in marriage, and was refused. Yes, the dog, he dared to ask that after once, by ill chance, he had seen her beauty. Now he has found out that we are going to make this journey, and his plan is to take her as already he has tried to take her at Luxor. But if we were with you, that he would not dare to do, for he has prostrated himself to the Government since you were away, and will not touch one whom he knows to be their envoy, although you may call yourself Mahommed, and be dressed like an Arab."

"I am not sure of that," answered Rupert. "Friend Ibrahim does not love me."

"No; but he fears you, which is better. With you we should be safe."

"How long do you wish to travel with me?"

"Two days only, till you come to the pass in the Jebal Marru. There you will follow along the mountains, but we cross them, and go on into the desert that is called Tebu till we come to more mountains and a certain secret oasis among them, which we name Tama, where no white man has ever set his foot. A while ago, Bey, you asked me of the lost temple. It stands there in our home, and I promise you this—let us ride in your shadow, and whenever you have leisure I will show you that temple in payment. Yes; and the wonders of the burying-place of the kings of the desert who once ruled there, and whose child, the lady Tama, stands at your side. Refuse, and I swear that you shall never see them."

"The bribe is great," said Rupert, "but, mother, I must not take bribes."

"No," she answered, "it is your business to offer them, is it not, else why do you carry so much gold in your baggage? Ah! you see I have good spies."

"So good," he said, "that evidently on this point they have misinformed you," for he was sure that she was but guessing. "Well," he repeated, "I must not be bribed, and pleasant as would be the company of both of you, I have other game to hunt."

Mea drew herself up, looking wonderfully dignified nothwithstanding her lack of height, and said in Arabic:

"My aunt, our request is refused; it is not seemly that we should ask again. We will go down the Nile a little, and hide till our messengers bring us an escort. Let us bid this Bey farewell; we keep him from his sleep."

"Perhaps the Bey has not done speaking," said Bakhita, who saw that Rupert had but paused in his words.

"You are right, mother, as usual," he went on, "and you know so much that I do not mind telling you a little more. It is my object to travel as a merchant; in fact," he added, "I have taken to that business which is more profitable than fighting."

Bakhita waved her hand to indicate that to attempt to throw dust in her eyes was mere waste of time, and he continued, smiling:

"Now merchants often take women with them, calling them their wives or daughters, purposing to sell or to make gifts of them to great emirs or sultans, whereas soldiers never do. Therefore, perhaps if you were in my company I should look more like a merchant, so I think that if you wish it I will take you. No, no, do not bow to me, for my own sake, not yours, especially as we are not sure of the way to the Jebal Marru, and doubtless you can guide us. Also have no fear; all that I have seen and heard is secret, though one day I hope that you will show me that temple in the oasis. Now I ride to-morrow at moonrise as I wish to pass the Sweet Wells the next night when men are asleep. You and your two servants can meet me where the path joins the road beyond the hill."

Bakhita seized his hand and kissed it. Evidently her mind was much relieved, and she was very grateful. Fearing lest her companion should follow her example, Rupert, who disliked such displays, said to her:

"Now that this is settled, are you not going to finish pouring your libations on the feet of the god yonder?"

Mea shook her head and answered:

"That I no can do; the libation is all poured on the feet of the man. I hope the god will not be, what you call it, jealous, and make you pay," and lifting the alabaster vessel she turned it upside down to show that it was empty.

"Then I will say good-night," said Rupert, "as perhaps it is best that we should not leave this place together. To-morrow, half an hour after moonrise, at the cross-paths, unless you should change your minds and go alone. Remember, I cannot wait," and bowing to Mea he left the chamber and groped his way down the hall towards the faint light that flowed through the door-place of the temple.

When he had gone the two women looked at each other.

"My aunt," said the younger; "have we done well? Shall we not bring that Bey into danger at the hands of the cursed Ibrahim?"

"Perhaps," answered Bakhita coolly. "If so, he takes us for his own sake, not for ours; you heard his words."

"Yes; but I do not believe them. It is for your sake that he does this because he thinks that you are his friend. If Ibrahim knows that we are with him, he will attack him and then—"

"And then," answered Bakhita; "well, I am told that Rupert Bey fights very well, and his men are brave and trained to war. Also it is necessary for us to find an escort. Had you come when you said you would a hundred of your own tribe would have brought you safely across the desert, but being frightened because Ibrahim tried to steal you at Luxor, you chose otherwise, and now it is not safe for you to bide here till we can send for them. Still, if you do not wish to travel with this Englishman, put on a blue robe and a yashmak and go to his tent to-morrow as if to sell corn, and tell him so, for I will not."

Mea thought a while, then looked up and said:

"Nay; I do wish to travel with him, for Fate made me pour the libation of the god upon his feet, and therefore is it that I wish to travel with him."

CHAPTER XII

THE WANDERING PLAYERS

THE moon was up, and Rupert, in his Arab garb and mounted on a dromedary, rode at the head of his caravan towards the district called Sheb, in which the Sweet Wells were situated. A few miles from Abu-Simbel, where the paths crossed, his head-man, a sergeant named Abdullah, drew his attention to four figures on white camels who appeared to be waiting for them, and asked if he should go forward to learn their business. Rupert answered no, as they were only two women and their servants to whom he had promised escort as far as Jebal Marru. The man saluted and said nothing. Presently the four joined the caravan, two veiled bundles, in whom indeed it would have been difficult to recognise Bakhita and Mea, placing themselves beside him and the men falling behind.

"So you have come," said Rupert, saluting them.

"Bey, we have come," answered Bakhita. "What else did you expect?" and without more words they rode forward across the desert.

Presently, in the midst of the intense silence, far away as yet, they heard a sound of wild music that grew clearer as they advanced. It was a very thrilling music, shrill and piercing and accompanied by the roll of drums.

"What is it?" asked Rupert of Bakhita.

"The Wandering Players," she answered, "and I wish that we had not met them."

"Why not?"

"Because they bring ill fortune, Bey."

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed. "You mean that they want baksheesh."

"Then offer it to them and see," she said.

Now they were passing a fold in the sand-hills, and on the crest of one of these hills, that to the right, Rupert perceived the Wandering Players. There were five of them, all seated upon the sand, and all so wrapped up that nothing could be seen of them, at any rate, in that light. The three who faced the caravan were playing upon bell-mouthed pipes, and the two who squatted opposite to them kept time upon drums which they beat with wonderful rapidity. As the caravan approached, this savage music grew very weird and moving; indeed its quality was such that once heard it could scarcely be forgotten. It seemed to cry and wail, yet there were notes in it of surprising sweetness.

"Give those players ten piastres for their trouble," said Rupert to his sergeant, Abdullah; and muttering something, the man guided his camel up the slope towards them, then offered them the money.

They too not the slightest notice of him, only played on more wildly than before, till at length he threw the coins upon the ground and left them.

"I think they are ghosts, not men," he reported to Rupert, "since there are no people in this country who will not take baksheesh."

"Ripe fruit does not remain unplucked," answered Rupert, in the words of the Arab proverb; "and that which falls the children gather."

Still, he wished that he had gone to look at the people himself, if only to discover what tribe it was that produced such remarkable players. Then they rode forward, and for some furlongs the penetrating sound of those pipes and the gusty rolling of the drums seemed to keep time with the

swinging step of their camels, till at last the music grew fitful and faint and died away in the distance.

When the moon was down, about three hours before the dawn, they halted by a well and slept till daylight, Bakhita and Mea occupying a little tent apart, which their servants pitched for them, and the camels grazing upon the desert scrub. While the sky was still grey, Rupert drank the coffee that had been made for him, and sent two pannikins of it, with some biscuits, to the women's tent. One was kept and one returned untouched.

"Who does not drink?" he asked idly.

"Bakhita, Bey. She says she touches no white man's liquor."

"So you know her?" said Rupert.

"Oh, yes, Bey," answered the man sulkily; "and we shall all of us know her better before we part, for she is a gipsy from the far desert, and has the evil eye. I felt cold all down my back when we met her last night—colder even than when that music played which is made by ghosts out of the tombs."

"Those who remain silent cannot speak folly," said Rupert, in another proverb, and dismissed the man.

Then they marched on, camping again in the afternoon until the moon should rise. That night, about one o'clock, they came to the Sweet Wells, and stopped to give the camels drink and to fill their water-bags. Rupert had arranged to arrive here at this hour when he thought that the sheik Ibrahim would be asleep and not likely to oppose their passage. For the same reason, he kept as far as possible from the town, if it could be so called, but soon saw that his progress was being watched, since men were sitting about on sand-heaps and in the shadow of thorn trees. Indeed, one of these rose unexpectedly before them and asked who they were and why they passed through the territory of his chief without offering a present.

By Rupert's direction the sergeant, Abdullah, answered that

they were a trading party who hoped to see Ibrahim on their return, when they would make him a good present. He did not add, however, that it was Rupert's wish to avoid meeting this truculent and treacherous man until he had bound over the powerful sheiks who lived beyond him to the interests of the Government, when, as he knew, he would have nothing to fear from the chief of the Sweet Wells and his handful of fighting men.

The sentry answered that it was well, especially as he could not now see Ibrahim, who had gone away with a number of his tribe, having ridden towards Wady-Halfa that very day. Then staring hard at the two veiled women upon their camels, he asked whether the gipsy, Bakhita, and her daughter were travelling with them. Abdullah hastily answered no, adding that the two women were his relations whom he was taking to visit their families. The man said no more, so with the usual salutations they passed on.

"Why did you say that, Abdullah?" asked Rupert.

"Because, Bey, had he known who these female bringers of ill-luck are, we should soon have had the whole tribe of them about us. It is said everywhere that Ibrahim wishes to take the young one, who is a great chieftainess, for a wife, and that he had sworn to do so."

"Lies are stones that fall on the head of the thrower," replied Rupert, for he was troubled and uneasy, and now wished sincerely that he had refused to escort Bakhita and her beautiful niece who made offerings to Egyptian gods to secure a safe journey across the desert.

He sent for Bakhita and the girl, who guided their camels alongside of his.

"Tell me," he said, "what is this story about the lady here and the sheik Ibrahim, who, it seems, is really looking out for her?"

"What I told you, Bey," Bakhita answered. "In old days,

when Ibrahim's tribe was the stronger, our people fought him and drove him back over the Jebal Marru—that was more than a hundred years ago. In the summer before last, when my lady of Tama and I, with a large escort, were coming from our home to the Nile, we camped at the Sweet Wells and accepted a present of food from the sheik Ibrahim. In the morning before we marched he visited us, and by misfortune saw Mea unveiled and was set on fire by her beauty, so that at once he asked her in marriage, the dog of a Prophet-worshipper. Having many men with us, I answered him as he deserved, whereon, growing angry, he replied that that which was refused could still be taken, but since we had eaten his salt, it must be done another time. So we parted, for we were too strong to be attacked. Now through his spies at Luxor and along the Nile he has learned that Mea is come back, which she did hurriedly when not expected, because he tried to kidnap her in Luxor itself. So it came about that I had no escort ready for her. Nor did I dare to stop at Abu-Simbel, for I heard that he proposed to attack us there so soon as you were gone, and there was no steamer by which she could descend the Nile again, whereof his people watch the banks. Therefore we sought your merciful protection."

"I think that before all is done you are likely to need it," said Rupert, "and were I what I seem that would not trouble me, but now I am afraid."

"Let us leave the Bey and take our chance," said Mea, speaking across him to her aunt in Arabic. "It is not right that we should bring him into danger. I told you so from the first."

"Yes," answered Bakhita briefly, "if the Bey so wishes."

Rupert glanced at Mea, who had drawn her veil aside, perhaps that she might see him better. The moonlight shone upon her sweet face, and he perceived that her eyes were full of fear. Evidently she dreaded the sheik very much indeed, who knew that in this lawless land where might was right, he could

take her without question if he were able, and force her into his harem.

"The Bey does not so wish," he said. "You are with me; bide with me. Often the thing we fear does not happen, my lady Tama."

With a grateful glance and a sigh of relief, Mea let fall her veil again, and both of them dropped back into their accustomed place in the caravan. At their next halt Rupert noted that one of Bakhita's two attendants remounted his swift dromedary, after it had been watered and allowed to feed a while, and started forward at a trot. Again he sent for Bakhita and asked where the man had gone. She answered that he had been despatched as a messenger to their tribe in the hope that he would get through the mountains unmolested. His orders were that, could he succeed in this, he was to collect a hundred men as soon as possible and bring them to meet their lady.

As it appeared, however, that the oasis which was Mea's home could not be reached by the swiftest camel under several days' journey, Rupert did not concern himself further about the matter. Only Abdullah grumbled, saying that he believed the man was a spy who had gone forward to make trouble. For Abdullah, who had discovered that Bakhita and her three companions were neither Christians nor Mahommedans, was full of suspicion, especially as he and the rest of Rupert's escort were convinced that the old woman was a witch with the evil eye and probably in the pay of the Khalifa. Such, indeed, had been her reputation at Abu-Simbel, to which Bakhita's curious knowledge of events and private histories, together with her very remarkable powers of observation, gave much colour.

On the night following that of these events, the party camped by some water at the foot of the rugged and barren range of hills known as Jebal Marru, in the very mouth of the pass, indeed, through which ran the only practicable road, that was

used, though rarely, by travellers journeying from one desert to the other. At its entrance this path was very narrow, a mere cleft in the rock, not more than fifty or sixty feet wide, and flanked on either side by sheer cliffs. Here Rupert and Bakhita and her companions were to part, for his road to the village of the first sheik whom he was going to visit ran along the foot of the hills, whereas theirs passed through them. At the earliest dawn they struck their camp, which they could not do before, since the road was too rough to attempt in the dark, and Rupert having seen that everything was in order for the march, went to bid good-bye to Bakhita and her niece.

While they were thanking him very heartily for his escort in the fine language common to Orientals, which on this occasion was meant earnestly enough, Abdullah hurried up and announced, in an alarmed voice, that a band of over a hundred men, mounted on camels and horses, was advancing upon them. He added that he believed them to be the chief Ibrahim and his followers. Instantly Rupert ordered that all the camels should be driven into the mouth of the pass, and that the men, with their rifles and a good supply of ammunition, should take refuge behind the boulders that were strewn about, in case an attack was contemplated. Then turning to Bakhita, he said quickly:

"Your camels are good and fresh. If you take my advice you will be gone. Probably they will not get through us for some time."

Bakhita said the counsel was wise, and ordered the camel, upon which she was already seated, to rise; but the girl seemed to hesitate. Stepping to Rupert as he turned away, she seized his hand and pressed it against her forehead, murmuring in her peculiar English:

"This trouble not my fault, all old woman Bakhita's fault, who think of nobody but me, not of you at all. I—I think much of you, my heart sick, I cry my eyes out. Good-bye! God bless you and damn Ibrahim."

Even then Rupert could not help smiling at this peculiar valedictory address. At that moment a man came and spoke to him, and when next he looked, Bakhita, Mea, and their servant were already vanishing round the bend of the pass. Now, as he wished to show no fear, he ordered his men to sit about as though they were still camping, but to keep their rifles ready, and accompanied by Abdullah and another soldier, went to a large rock in front of them, sat down, lit his pipe and waited.

By this time the band was quite close and had halted. Presently two men rode out from among them, in whom Rupert recognised his old acquaintance the sheik Ibrahim, and the sentry with whom they had spoken near the Sweet Wells. Ibrahim rode up, and from a distance asked if he had peace.

"Those who bring peace find it," answered Rupert.

Then Ibrahim dismounted and walked forward alone, leaving his servant to hold his horse. Rupert also walked forward until they met and exchanged salutations.

"Bey," said Ibrahim, surveying Rupert's garb with his flashing eyes, "you have changed your dress since last we spoke yonder on the hill above Abu-Simbel. Tell me, have you changed your heart also and become a servant of the Prophet whom I can greet as brother?"

"You had other names for me than brother at Abu-Simbel," answered Rupert evasively "What is your business, Sheik Ibrahim, with the merchant Mahommed, who, by the way, offers you his congratulations, having learned that now you also are a servant of the Government."

"My business, Bey," he replied, "has nothing to with the Government, or with you. Two women are travelling with you who are my property. Hand them over to me."

"Two free women were travelling with me, Sheik, but I cannot give them to you as they are gone."

"Whither?" asked Ibrahim.

"Really, I do not know, it is their own affair," said Rupert calmly.

Now the sheik's evil temper began to get the better of him.

"You lie," he said. "I will search your camp, for they are hidden there."

"If you wish to find rifle bullets, search," replied Rupert significantly. "Listen, Ibrahim! I am camped here, and here I shall stay until you go, since I do not trust you and will not expose myself to attack upon the road. If you venture on violence, it is possible that you may succeed, since my mission is peaceful and I have but few men. But then the Khedive, your lord, will stamp you out, you and your tribe, and so there will be an end of an evil and dangerous man. I have spoken, go in peace."

"By Allah! no," shouted the Arab. "I come in war, for besides that of these women there is an old account to settle between you and me, who caused my town to be raided by the Government of Egypt, my women to be insulted, and my herds to be taken. Choose now. Hand over to me your camels, your merchandise and your arms, and of my mercy I will let you go. Resist, and I will take them all and offer to you, infidel, the choice between death and Islam."

"Empty drums make a loud noise," replied Rupert contemptuously, whereon the Arab, lifting the spear which he carried, hurled it at him.

Rupert sprang to one side, so that the weapon missed him by a hair's-breadth.

"Now," he said, "I can shoot you if I wish; but I will not forget my honour because you forget yours. Dog! God will avenge your treachery on you."

"By my beard!" roared the Arab, "I will avenge Allah on you—yes, your infidel lips shall kiss his holy name."

Then Rupert walked towards his men, who were running out to his assistance.

"Back," he said, "and take cover. Ibrahim is about to attack us."

So they went back and, since flight seemed utterly impracticable, having hastily tethered the camels in a recess of the cliff out of reach of rifle fire, lay down, every man behind a rock. Here Rupert addressed them, telling them what had passed, and saying they must either fight or be robbed and made prisoners, which would probably mean their death, since Ibrahim would not dare to allow any of them to live and be witnesses against him when he was brought to account for this great crime. Therefore, though they were but few, as they, mounted on camels, could not run from horsemen, it was wise that they should do their best.

The soldiers, who were all of them brave men, answered that it was so, they were few, still they would fight and try to beat off these Arabs. Only Abdullah looked downcast, and added that this trouble came upon them through the women, and that it would have been good to give them to Ibrahim.

"Would you think so if they were your wives or daughters?" asked Rupert scornfully. "How could I surrender them who had eaten of my bread and salt? Also they have gone. But if you are afraid, Abdullah, do you take a camel and follow them. The rest of us will hold the pass and give you time to get away."

Now some of the servants began to mock Abdullah and to call him "woman" and "coward."

So the man grew ashamed and said that he would show them that he was as brave as they.

Then a rifle bullet, evidently aimed at Rupert, who was standing up to address the soldiers, whistled past his head and flattened on the rock behind. The fight had begun.

Rupert saw the man who had fired the shot from the back of his camel about two hundred yards away, for the smoke hung over him. Snatching up the Winchester repeating rifle which he carried, he set the sight rapidly, aimed and fire. He

was an excellent game and target shot, nor did his skill fail him now. Almost instantly they heard the clap of a bullet and saw the Arab—it was that very sentry with whom they had spoken at the Sweet Wells—throw up his arms and pitch heavily from the saddle to the ground.

The soldiers shouted, thinking this a good omen, and at once opened fire, killing or wounding several of their enemies, whereon the Arabs hastened to take shelter, sending their horses and camels out of reach of the bullets.

The mouth of the pass was strewn with large stones, and creeping from one to another of them, the Arabs advanced slowly, pouring in a heavy fire as they came. As it chanced, this did but little damage, for Rupert's cover was good, while as they moved forward his rifles found out several of them. Thus things went on for a full hour, till at length Rupert saw the head of a soldier near him, who had incautiously exposed himself, drop forward on to the rock. He was shot through the brain, and immediately afterwards one of his comrades, who rose to lift him, thinking that he might be only wounded, received a bullet in the shoulder.

So the fight stood for all that live-long day. No more men were hit, for after this lesson they dared not show themselves, and unless they did so, the enemy did not fire. There they lay, cramped up behind their stones and baked in the burning sun. Of food they had plenty, but as it happened the water, of which there was none here, was scarce, for they had used nearly all of it on the previous night, expecting to be able to refill their bags at a well a little further along the mountains. Although it was husbanded, soon the last drop had been drunk, so that towards evening they began to suffer from thirst.

At length the sun sank and the darkness came.

CHAPTER XIII

THE END OF THE FIGHT

Now during all these weary hours Rupert had been taking counsel with himself. He was skilled in Arab warfare, and guessed that Ibrabim's plan was not to attempt to rush him in the daylight, which at best would cost him many more men and might mean defeat, but to get among his little band with the spear under cover of the night, or perhaps just at the break of dawn. Utterly outnumbered as they were, to such a move as this there could be but one end—annihilation. It was, however, possible that it would not be made; that the Arabs would be content to continue their present tactics, knowing that Rupert had no hope of succour, and that soon or late thirst must conquer him. Therefore it would seem that he was driven to choose between two alternatives—surrender or retreat. He gathered his men together and addressed them through the darkness, not hiding from them how desperate he thought their plight.

Under the circumstances, he said, if they wished to surrender he would not forbid them, only then he believed that whatever promises were made, they would all be killed, or at the best taken away and sold as slaves to the Khalifa, or his emirs, with whom, doubtless, Ibrahim was in league. For himself, however, he should certainly not surrender, but choosing the best place he could find, fight on till he was killed like Gordon.

With one voice the soldiers said they would not suffer this; their business was to die with their captain, not desert him: they were Soudanese and men, not Fellaheen.

He thanked them simply, and put before them the second alternative—that of retreat. The pass behind them was open, though none of them had ever travelled it, and a map he had showed a water-hole about some thirty miles away in the desert beyond, which they might reach. Or failing that, when they were clear of the pass they could turn and skirt along the mountains, taking their chance of water and of safety. Or they could try to cut their way back to Wadi-Halfa, a thing however that seemed hopeless, since if they got through, they would be overtaken, surrounded and picked off in the open desert.

Having discussed the matter among themselves the men announced their decision that flight was best. For the rest, they said, they resigned themselves to *el Mektub* which means "to that which is written"; or in other words, to Destiny. Then Rupert called the roll to see that all were present. Two did not answer to their names—the dead man and the sergeant Abdullah. At first it was thought that the latter had been killed also, till someone remembered that early in the afternoon he had gone to tend and feed the camels, since when he had not been seen. Afterwards it was discovered that, anticipating his commander's plan, he had already retreated—with the best camel—an act of cowardice which, it will be seen, produced very grave results to Rupert, and indeed profoundly influenced his subsequent career. For here it may be said at once that Abdullah got back to the Nile in safety by skirting round the mountains, and needless to add, made his own report to the authorities, which, as it happened, there was no one to contradict.

Now, their counsel taken, the little band set themselves to carry it out as best they could without delay, since they knew not at what moment the attack might be delivered. First they built a fire of whatever material they could collect and lit it, so as to suggest to the Arabs that they remained in camp there. Also, having said the prayers for the dead over him,

they set their fallen companion behind a stone, above which one hand and his rifle projected, in such a position that the light of the fire fell upon them. Two of the worst camels also they left behind, that their roaring might deceive the enemy into the belief that the caravan had not moved. This done they started as noiselessly as possible, only to find that their task was more difficult even than they thought.

The moon not being up, the darkness in that narrow gorge was intense; moreover, the pass was strewn with boulders and pitted with holes washed out by water, in one of which a camel soon broke its leg and had to be killed with a knife and left with its valuable load. Not half a mile further on another camel fell over a bank or precipice—they could not tell which—and vanished, while a man twisted his ankle, and a second, stumbling, struck his forehead against a stone and cut it badly. After this Rupert ordered a halt till the moon rose since to proceed was practically impossible. At length the moon came, but the sky was cloudy, also she was on the wane; so they found themselves but little better off in that deep gulf. Still they struggled on, praying for daylight, and taking comfort from the thought that if the Arabs followed, matters would be equally bad for them.

The sky turned grey, the dawn broke, and then with the startling suddenness that will be familiar to all travellers in the Egyptian desert, the sun rose, and by its light they pushed forward. For a mile or so all went well till they came to a place where the pass opened out, and its sides, no longer precipitous, were clothed with scrub and boulders. Then suddenly from behind one of these boulders rang out a rifle shot. A few yards ahead, in the centre of the valley, was a little hill or kopje, also boulder-strewn, and understanding at once what had happened, namely, that the Arabs, foreseeing this retreat, probably on the previous afternoon, had sent most of their force over the mountains to waylay them, Rupert shouted to his band to make for this kopje and hold it.

They did so under a fierce fire, but as the Arab shooting was bad and the mist still hung at the bottom of the valley, without much loss. On the kopje were two or three of the enemy's marksmen whom they dislodged and killed. Then taking the best positions they could find, the little company prepared itself to inflict all the damage it could upon its foes before it met its inevitable doom. Although a man fell now and again this was delayed for several hours, until at length the rest of the Arabs, who had followed them down the pass, arrived.

Then came the last bitter struggle. Such things sound heroic to tell of—the forlorn stands of the few against the many always do—but in practice they are only dreadful; the glory is naught but a residuum deposited in the cauldrons of their sanguinary and seething horror by the powerful precipitants of distance, romance, and time.

Thus this last desperate fight of a few wearied men against many may be noble to read of, but in fact it was merely hideous. Brave things were done by these black Soudanese, who, if they are well led and trust their leader, will not surrender with a loss of about five per cent. in killed and wounded; indeed surrender was talked of no more. But though it was emphasised thereby, who could think of gallantry when a man shot through the bowels lay writhing on the ground beside him, cursing and praying by turns, but still loading his gun, and, in the pauses of his paroxysms, bringing other men to their death. When the tongue is hanging from the jaws with thirst, when the brows throb with fatigue and pain, and the heart is well-nigh bursting with rage, grief for those who will be seen no more, and apprehensions of the dreadful end, who can think of the cup and chaplets of fame, and the empty trappings of honour?

At least Rupert could not. He fought on grimly; he did his best. Two rushes he repelled, for now that their fire slackened, the Arabs were trying to make an end of them with

the spear. In the intervals that followed these rushes Rupert thought of Edith. He wondered what she was doing, and remembered that without doubt she would be comfortably in bed and asleep, dreaming no dreams of him, and his sore plight. He wondered if when he died, as he must do in a few minutes, it would wake her, or whether she would still sleep on as his spirit passed. Then he remembered the other woman, that strange, high-bred native girl, and it came into his mind that *she* would wake however sound she slept, and that there would be vengeance taken for this death of his, the wild vengeance of the desert. Next he forgot all such things, and shook a dying comrade by the hand.

"*Kismet!*" said the man, with a ghastly smile, "and we have killed more of them than they can kill of us. The water of the Sweet Wells will be bitter for a while. Allah is good and Paradise pleasant. Are you hurt, Bey?"

"Not yet," he answered; "but wait, I come presently. Ah! that got him fair."

"No, don't come," answered the man, "live on if you may. He who lives long sees much, and amongst other things vengeance on his enemies. Live on, and you will see the sheik Ibrahim hanging to the bough of a thorn."

Then the soldier grunted, rolled on to his face, and was dead.

. . . . . .

Puffs of smoke spurted from behind rocks; spears shone in the sunlight; hoarse voices announced the fact which nobody contradicted—that Allah was great and Mahomet was his prophet; here and there men fell forward or backward, still declaring that Allah was great, and instantly departed from the body to put the argument to proof. Blood ran in thin, black streams, and was soaked up by the thankful soil; men died beneath the hands of their fellow-men as in this devil-ridden world they have done from the beginning, and will do

till the end. Untouched by some miracle, Rupert still fought on. His rifle was empty; a tall, bearded Arab had fallen before its last shot. Then quite close to him he saw Ibrahim, and remembering his revolver, drew it, when suddenly a heavy blow from behind felled him to the ground.

Rupert came to himself again, and by degrees understood dimly that he was not dead, since he lay where he had fallen, and all about him were slain and wounded men. Near by, also, stood two of his own people, captives, with their hands tied behind them. The sheik Ibrahim was questioning them, promising them life if they would tell him where they had hidden away the gipsy Bakhita and her companion, the lady Mea. They answered that they accepted his terms, and would do so with pleasure. They were hidden in the desert, whither they had departed before the beginning of the fight, so if he wanted them he had best go look for them there.

This answer seemed to infuriate the sheik, who called to some of his people to kill "these dogs." They came, whereon the two men, putting down their heads, butted at them like rams, and knocking one of them down, jumped and trampled on his face until the cruel swords did their work with them and they died there. Then the wounded were killed also, so that presently, of all his company, Rupert alone was left alive.

Now they caught hold of him and asked him questions about the women, but he pretended not to be able to speak because of thirst, pointing to his throat and mouth. The artifice succeeded, for they brought him water, of which he stood in terrible need. The bowl was large, but he emptied all of it, and felt his life come back to him. Now Ibrahim addressed him.

"Dog of an unbeliever," he said, "you see that your cunning and courage have not availed against the decrees of Allah who has destroyed all your band!"

"It is so," answered Rupert; "but he seems to have destroyed many of yours also. Here I count over twenty

of your dead, and thirty wounded. Allah is just, and takes life for life."

"Blaspheme not, dog! Of Allah I will speak to you afterwards. Tell me—where are the women?"

"Those brave men whom you murdered after promising them their lives have told you; they are in the desert. Go; search for them there. Come; I tire of this talk. Murder me also, and begone to meet the doom that God prepares in this world and the next for the traitor and the liar."

"You wish to die, then?" asked Ibrahim, lifting his spear.

"Aye; why not? My people are slaughtered; I would join them. Also, I must make report of you and your deeds, and prepare you a place."

The Arab dropped his spear; Rupert's words seemed to frighten him.

"Not yet, nor so swiftly," he said. "Bind him and put him on a camel. He shall see us catch these women, and after that we will judge him according to the law."

So they tied Rupert with ropes, and set him on his own dromedary. Presently he started forward with the Arabs—about forty of them. The rest were either dead or wounded, or had been left to convey the latter and the rich booty, including the thousand pounds in gold, back to the Sweet Wells. At the mouth of the pass, a few miles further on, they searched, and in some soft soil found the spoor of the camels ridden by Bakhita, Mea, and their servant, and seeing that it led out into the desert beyond, followed swiftly. All that day they rode till they came to the water-pool that was marked upon the map, and here, being very weary after their desperate fight and long travelling, the Arabs would go no further, although their sheik urged them to do so. So they camped there by the water, and ate dates and cakes of flour, some of which were given to Rupert.

Whilst they ate, an old man and two old women, one of them blind—wanderers who were hidden in the scrub near

the water—crept out and begged for food. It was given to them, and when they had filled themselves, Ibrahim asked them if two women and a man mounted on camels had passed that way.

They answered, yes, about thirty hours before. By this time they must be far away as, after only a short rest to water their camels and to eat, they had departed very swiftly.

Now Ibrahim understood that his prey had escaped him. Indeed, the Arabs refused to follow them any further into the desert, where they feared they might be trapped by Mea's people, and die like their brethren in the pass. His rage knew no bounds, since he was well aware the booty that he had taken could not in the least compensate for the death of so many of his best men; whose loss in a private quarrel, moreover, would be bitterly resented by the tribe, and especially by the women. He was sure, also, that as Rupert had said, the Government would avenge this great murder by sending an expedition against him, which could only be avoided by his escaping with the remainder of his people to join the Khalifa.

Lastly, all had been done in vain, since the woman, Mea, whom he desired with the fierce intensity which is characteristic of the inhabitants of the Soudan, had got away safely to her own land of Tama which was far too strong for him to attack. All these ills and others had been brought upon him, he reflected, by his old enemy, the English Bey, who had protected Mea, and with his small band fought so stubbornly in the pass that he had been unable to pursue and capture her. Hate of this dogged infidel boiled up in Ibrahim's black and cruel heart, till with a flash of joy he remembered that at least he could make him pay for these misfortunes.

Suddenly he gave orders that the prisoner should be led before him. Accordingly he was brought to where Ibrahim sat near the cooking fire under the shadow of an ancient and wide-spreading thorn.

"What is your pleasure with me, Sheik?" asked Rupert calmly. "Is the appointed hour at hand? If so, be swift, for I am tired and wish to sleep."

"Not yet, dog," answered Ibrahim; "and perhaps not at all, for I remember the saying: 'He is merciful who forgives.' Though an infidel, you are a brave man."

"I do not ask your forgiveness; it is you who should ask mine, who have again broken faith with your master the Khedive and murdered my people without cause," answered Rupert proudly.

"Nor do I offer it," said Ibrahim; "but Allah offers, and I am his servant. Once—do you remember?—I promised you that a day would come when I should command you to make choice between death and Islam. It is here. Choose now. Accept the faith publicly, which should not be hard to you, seeing that already you wear the garb and travel under the holy name of the Prophet; write it in a letter to your masters at Cairo that you renounce them and are one of the faithful, and that you blame me not, and go free. Or refuse and die an infidel. I have said."

Rupert laughed in his face.

"Have done with such idle talk," he answered. "Am I a child or a woman that I should be frightened by death which I have faced a score of times since yesterday? Traitor Ibrahim, you can bind my body, but not my spirit. I have chosen."

So he spoke and stood still, awaiting death. But it did not come. Ibrahim turned aside and consulted with some of his people. Then with a cruel smile he said:

"I will not be provoked. I will still show mercy and give your stubborn spirit time for repentance, that it may not lose the joys of Paradise. Throw him down."

They obeyed, and as he lay on his back staring through the branches of the tree at the tender sky above, Rupert saw one man, whom he had heard speaking of himself as a butcher by

trade, draw his sword, while another heated the broad blade of a spear in the fire. Then for the first time he felt afraid. Death he did not fear—but mutilation!

. . . . . .

Fourteen hours had gone by and Rupert was still living. Yes, although they had hacked off his right foot, and in the morning when again he refused to accept the Koran, burnt out his left eye and scored his cheek with a hot iron, being strong, he still lived. Now he was seated on the saddle of a dromedary beneath the thorn tree, a noose about his neck, the rope to which it was attached being thrown over a bough of the tree. They were about to hang him, but first, again in the name of mercy, gave him a little while to change his mind and accept the faith.

The agonies of his body and his soul were very great, but Rupert still sat there proudly, the ruin of a man, uttering no complaint, making no plea for pity. Only in his heart he wondered humbly what he had done that these terrors should come upon him. Then he remembered that in this blood-stained Soudan, the home of fanaticism and devilry, many a man as good or better than himself—yes, and many a woman also, had been called upon to suffer even worse things, and bowed his mangled head in submission to the decree of Destiny. Never once during those long hours of torment had he dreamed of purchasing its remission, as by a word he could have done. For this he took no credit to himself, whose faith and pride were both too deeply rooted to permit him even to entertain the thought.

This world was ended for him; none would ever know even the hideous fashion of his farewell to the sun. Now he had but one desire left—to show no sign of pain or fear to his tormentors, and brave and loyal to the last, to enter on the next. Even those heartless fiends marvelled at his courage, and grew half ashamed of their red work. They wished to let

him go, but Ibrahim said nay, it was too late, he must die for their safety's sake. Indeed, even had Rupert been weak and entered Islam, it was still his intention that he should die. Only the Arab wished to break his spirit first as he had broken his body.

They had left him alone a while, knowing that he could not stir, and were saddling their beasts. Now they came back, all of them, and stood in front of him, watching him with curious eyes. God be thanked! the end was at hand, and soon he would feel no more of those racking pains. There they stood, grave and silent, pitying him in their hearts, all except Ibrahim, who chose this moment to expound to his victim the principal doctrines of the Koran, and to assure him that he must certainly go to hell.

Rupert made no answer, only looked over the heads of his tormenters, with the eye that was left to him, at the little slope of land opposite, of which the crest ran not more than a hundred yards away. Was he mad, or was he altogether blind, and did he perhaps see visions in his blindness? If not, coming over the brow of that hill were horsemen, armed with spears, and amongst them a woman, who also held in her hand a spear. They looked, they halted, they spread out, but the murderers, intent upon the face of the dying man, never heard the sound of them on that soft sand and against the strong desert wind.

"It is without avail," Ibrahim said. "The infidel dog rejects the cup of mercy; let him die the death of a dog," and he seized the rope.

"One moment," broke in Rupert, in a thick voice, "that last point of yours, Sheik, touches my reason; light breaks upon me from on high. Repeat it, I pray you."

Ibrahim smiled cruelly. He had triumphed, the gallant English chief turned coward at the last. Then he began to repeat his argument.

The horsemen came on in a semi-circle, a hundred of them at least, or Rupert dreamed that they did. No, by Heaven! it was no dream, for hark now to that shrilling battle-cry of "*Tama, Tama!*" and hark to the thunder of the hoofs as the spurred horses sprang forward wildly and galloped down upon them. The Arabs wheeled round and saw their doom. With mad shouts of terror they fled this way and that, rushing towards the camels. As he went, Ibrahim hurled a spear at Rupert, but again it only grazed his head.

Then came the swift and sudden vengeance. Some were cut down and some were captured, Ibrahim among them. In two minutes it was over. A horse was dragged to its haunches almost in front of him, and from its back leapt a woman—Mea. She cast down her spear, she ran to him and threw her arms about him; she kissed him on the brow, and seeing what were the nature of his hurts, wept and cursed in English and in Arabic. Then, those soft eyes of hers flashing terribly, she turned and screamed an order:

"Bring them hither, every one of them that lives."

They haled them up, a score of them or more; yes, even the dying; blood-stained, with rent garments and head-dresses gone, they dragged them before her.

"Now," she said, in a voice of icy fury, "do unto them as they have done to the English lord, only from Ibrahim cut off both hands and both feet before you hang him to the tree."

The miserable men flung themselves upon the ground, pleading for mercy. Yes, even Ibrahim prostrated himself at her feet and prayed to be slain at once. As well might he have prayed to a stone idol of slaughter. Indeed, drawn up to her full height, every nerve in her quivering, her soft and lovely face alive with rage and horror, she looked more like a goddess of vengeance than a woman.

"Spare them, lady," said Rupert hoarsely; "they are but fanatic barbarians. Spare them for my sake."

She turned on him.

"Be silent, Bey," she answered roughly. "Shall I not do vengeance for your sake who were made thus for me?"

Then at length he swooned away, and when an hour later he came to himself again to find his head lying on Mea's lap, while Bakhita doctored his hurts with cloths and ointments, he saw that the awful decree had been executed, for there upon the thorns those murdering Arabs hung, every one of them.

CHAPTER XIV

MEA MAKES A PROPOSAL

THAT sight of the corpses of his tormentors hanging to the thorn trees was the last that Rupert was destined to see for many a day. Indeed for weeks, so far as any subsequent memory was concerned, he remained quite unconscious. Unconscious they bore him in a litter across the desert to the Black Pass of the further mountains where no white man had set foot, and on through the heart of them to the hidden oasis around which they stood like sentinels. Here placed by the waters, beneath the shade of palms and near to the towering pylons of the ruined temple, stood the town, Tama, over which by right of descent the lady Mea held her rule. It was not a large town, for the tribe was small, not numbering more than four hundred men who could bear arms for, proud of their ancient blood and hating strangers, they would intermarry with no other folk, and therefore the old race dwindled. But the land was very rich, and the houses were well built and stored, since being so few in number there was little poverty among the children of Tama.

Mea brought Rupert to her own home, which was large, comfortable and built of stone taken from the ruined temple; surrounded also by gardens. Here she and Bakhita nursed him as a man has seldom been nursed before. There were doctors in the tribe who, as is sometimes the case among African natives, had a certain rude knowledge of surgery.

These men drew the seared flesh over his severed bone so that in this pure air, and kept clean with astringent

ointment, it healed without mortifying or other complications. They doctored his head also, but in such matters their skill was little, nor could anything they were able to do prevent the inflammation from spreading to the other eye. This passed in time, but its sight was affected so much that when at length Rupert woke up from his wanderings, he thought that it must be night-time, for dense darkness hung before him like a veil.

For a long while he could not remember or guess where he was, but by degrees recollection returned, only he thought it must be that left by a nightmare.

It was Mea's voice which in the end opened the closed doors of his understanding. She had seen the change in Rupert's face and trembled with hope, believing that at last his reason had come back to him. For a while she watched him as he groped about aimlessly with his hands until she learnt that as they had feared, he was blind. At length, able to bear the suspense no more, she spoke to him in her quaint English.

"You sleep very long, Rupert Bey. Now you awake, yes?"

He turned his head, listening intently, then said:

"Is that not Mea's voice, the lady Mea who poured a libation to the gods at Abu-Simbel?"

"Yes, yes," she answered eagerly, "of course. No one else have voice like Mea. All of them stupid and can't talk English. But," she went on, again watching him, for she wished to know how much he remembered, "I pour that cup over your feet, not over the god, and Bakhita say that why everything go upside down, and you lose your poor foot."

Her voice trembled as she spoke the words, and it was only with an effort that she could add:

"But I think Bakhita silly old woman who talk confounded nonsense. Gods only old stones, and which way cup tumbled nothing to do with luck."

Even then and there Rupert laughed, and oh! how she rejoiced to hear him. Then his poor twisted face grew grave and he said:

"Tell me, Mea, all about my foot and eyes, and what happened. Don't be afraid, I can bear it now."

So she took his hand and told him everything, speaking in her rich and native Arabic, for the resources of the English language, as she knew it, were not equal to that tale. Yet in its essence it was short. Bakhita and she and their attendant travelled the pass of Jebal Marru in safety, and journeyed on at great speed, for their camels were as good as any in the desert, pausing a little while at the wells, as the old wanderers had said. When they drew near the Black Gate, as the gully was called, by which they approached the oasis, to their joy they met a hundred of their own men who, summoned by the messenger that they had sent forward, were coming out to seek them.

At once they returned upon their tracks. Bakhita and the emirs had wished her, Mea, to go on to her home, but this she refused to do. Indeed she asserted her authority and took command, pushing back, almost without rest as fast as the horses could travel, and thus arrived in time. It seemed that they had seen the smoke of the cooking fire, and it was this that made them approach the wells so quietly. She described to Rupert what she felt when she perceived him sitting mutilated upon the camel furniture with the noose about his throat.

"A flame burnt up within me, the air turned red, the sand of the desert smelt of blood, and I swore to avenge you or die. Aye, and Rupert Bey, I did avenge. Not one of them escaped, and with my own hand I drove my spear through the heart of that dog, Ibrahim. Yes, I left him his eyes that he might see the stroke. Oh, they never wrung a word from you, he confessed it; but *he* cried to me for mercy, and that was the best of all. He cried to me for mercy, and I gave him the spear."

Rupert shook her hand loose from his.

"You did wrong," he answered; "you should have shown mercy. It is written: 'Love your enemies'; but I forget, you have never learned."

"I have learned," she answered; "but how could I pardon him who would have forced me, Tama—(she pronounced it Támá as though the word were spelt with two r's)—me, born of the ancient blood, into his vile harem? Nay, that perhaps I might have forgiven, but when I saw you, Rupert Bey, with that rope about your neck, blinded and with your foot struck off, all for me—all for me, a stranger to you, not of your family, not of your house—oh! then I could not forgive. Nay, I wished that he had a hundred lives that I might take them all, and—be not angry with me—I wish it still. I am not unkind. Ask my people here if I have ever slain, or even beaten one of them without a cause, but that sight, it made me like a leopard whose cubs have been killed before her eyes. Think not the worse of me. I will repent, I will learn better, but oh! I am glad that I drove the spear through the heart of Ibrahim and watched him die. And Bakhita is worse than I am, remember that, she wished to kill him slowly."

"What is done, is done," answered Rupert. "This desert is a cruel place, and God forgive us all for many things."

Then he paused, nor did he resist her when timidly she took his hand again, he who guessed that she had sinned for him.

"Tell me, Mea," he said, "shall I always be blind as well as maimed?"

"I do not know," she answered, with a sob. "Our doctors do not know. I pray not. Oh, I wish that Ibrahim were alive again that he might go blind for all his days. Nay, pardon me, pardon, but that deed of his was evil, because you would not worship his accursed prophet, or so he said, who hated you for other reasons. Now rest you, Bey, rest you; you must not talk so much. I will sit at your side and keep

the flies from off your face. Rest, and I will sing you to sleep," and she began to croon over him some ancient song that may have come down from the days of the Pharaohs, as a mother croons above a fevered babe.

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This was the beginning of Rupert's life at Tama. By degrees his strength came back to him, but for three months he remained stone-blind, and during all that time Mea's hand was seldom out of his. With the help of a little dog that he held by a string, she led him to and fro; she nursed and doctored him; she watched his sleep. He remonstrated, he grew angry even, and then for a while old Bakhita came, and he was left with her and the little dog, but next morning it was always Mea's soft hand that he felt in his, and not Bakhita's bony fingers. For a long while he thought little of all this. Even in health and strength, Rupert was the least vain of men, but broken, mutilated, scarred, blinded as he was, a horror such as those that sit the streets of Cairo to beg for alms, it never even occurred to him that a woman, lovely, and in her own world high-placed as he knew Mea to be, would think of him as more than a friend to whom she was grateful for service rendered. Yet at last he did begin to have misgivings. He could not see her, but there was a note in her voice when she spoke to him, there was something in her touch when she took his hand, a kind of caress, which alarmed him.

He took occasion to talk to her about his wife in England, and even gave her to look at the miniature of Edith, painted upon ivory which he had in a gold locket. She studied it carefully, said that the lady was pretty, but cold as the hour before a winter dawn, and then asked if she were really his wife, or only called so, and she used a phrase that can best be translated by the words, "for political reasons."

"Of course," answered Rupert. "Why do you ask such a question?"

"Because if she is your wife, why is she in England, not in Egypt? She is not ill and she has no children to tend, is it so?"

Rupert was forced to answer that so far as he was aware, Edith's health was good, and of course there were no children. In order to explain her absence, he added that she did not like heat.

"Ah!" replied Mea enigmatically, and in English, "in cold country, cold wife; in warm country, kind wife; *that* all right."

Then finding further explanation difficult, Rupert called the little dog, asked her to take him for a walk, and was tenderly led round the garden.

As soon as his general health was a little re-established, as he could not see to write, Rupert had dictated a letter to Mea addressed to the Government in Cairo, and giving an account of the miserable end of his mission. This letter was sent off by a messenger to Wady-Halfa, together with another to Edith, also written by Mea. When in after days he saw the postscript which she added, but had not thought necessary to read to him, he was somewhat astonished. It ran: "To the white wife of Rupert Bey from Mea, lady of Tama.

"Do not trouble for your lord; I look after him well, and love him with all my heart. Why not? He massacred for me. I hope we not quarrel when we meet. In England, you head. In Soudan, I head. That good plan; no trouble at all. I give greetings, and make bow.—Your sister, "MEA."

As it happened, these epistles never reached their destinations, since within a week the messenger returned saying that the whole country on the other side of the Jebal Marru was in a ferment. It seemed that Abdullah, Rupert's sergeant, had escaped safely, and reported that Rupert and all his people were killed. Thereon the Government had sent an expedition against the remnant of the tribe of Ibrahim, sheik of the Sweet Wells. These people, being warned of their fate, had appealed to the Khalifa, with the result that several thousand of his

adherents, under a powerful emir, were despatched to their assistance, though whether from the neighbourhood of Suakim or from the north, Rupert could not discover. At any rate, they were too many to be attacked by the little Government expedition, and for the while remained in possession of the territory between the Jebal Marru and the Nile.

At first Rupert was inclined to believe that Mea had concocted this story for her own purposes, but Bakhita assured him that it was not so. She said, moreover, that the Black Pass by which alone the oasis could be approached was watched day and night to guard against sudden attack by those who wished to avenge the death of Ibrahim, and every possible preparation made to fight to the last. No attack came, however, for the oasis was looked upon as a haunted place among the neighbouring tribes, who feared its inhabitants also as infidel wizards favoured by the devil. Their treatment of the band of Ibrahim who had been found hanging to the trees, and especially of that unlucky skeik himself, had not, it seemed, lessened this impression.

Subsequently the letters were again despatched in the charge of two messengers. In due course one of these brought them back for the second time. He had fallen in with an outpost of the Mahdists and barely escaped with his life, his companion being overtaken and speared.

After this Rupert abandoned his attempts to communicate with civilisation. Plunged as he was in utter darkness of mind and body, his days were sad enough. He had failed in his mission, and the very chiefs whom he hoped to win over were, he learned, now firm adherents of the Khalifa. His career was at an end, for he had lost his leg and his sight, and worst of all, his wife must believe that he was dead. It tore his heart to think of her and his mother's distress and agony; but what could he do except bow his head in patience before the Power that had decreed these things, and pray that some of the burden might be lifted from his back?

For he was not dead, nor like to die. Mea, who innocently enough had brought all this trouble upon him, had saved his life by her sweet care, as by her swift decision and fierce courage she saved him from the noose. Rupert believed that he owed his reason to her also, for at times in the beginning, when all the weight of his terrible misfortunes pressed upon his brain and crushed him, it seemed like to fail. Then she who watched him always would see and understand. And, since the customs of the East are always the same, as "when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took an harp and played with his hand; so Saul was refreshed and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him," so did Mea take her harp and play before Rupert and sing over him in that full, sweet voice of hers, the old, old songs of Egypt, some of which she no longer understood, till at length for a little while he forgot his sorrows and was refreshed. Moreover, there came to him one happiness, his sight returned.

He was lying on an angarib, or native bedstead, during the heat of the afternoon in the large, cool room that had been given to him, since if he sat up for long his mutilated leg still pained him, whilst over against him, Mea sat upon a stool. She had been playing to him, singing as she played; but now her harp-like instrument lay at her side and she watched him in silence, her chin resting upon her hand. He knew that she was looking at him, for he could feel her gaze, and was amusing himself by trying to recollect the exact fashion of her beauty, which he had really seen but thrice—in the temple at Abu-Simbel; when she bade farewell to him in the pass; and lastly, when she appeared again at the head of her charging regiment and decreed the doom of Ibrahim and his brigands.

This last time did not count, however, for then she was quite changed, a valkyrie, an animated Vengeance, not a woman. Now he amused himself by attempting to reconcile these two countenances that both were hers, and in wondering what sort of face she wore to-day. Useless as it was, from old

habit, he looked towards her through the pitchy, maddening darkness that hemmed him in like a wall.

He looked, and lo! he saw. On that darkness there appeared something soft and cloudy, and he knew that it was a woman's outspread hair. Then within the frame of hair arose a ghost-like face, and in it shining eyes, from which tears ran down, and on it such a look of utter tenderness as he never, never had beheld. Oh! it was beautiful, that face; always it would have been beautiful, but to this man who, after those weeks of utter blindness, beheld it first of anything, it was like a vision out of heaven. And the look upon it! Surely that, too, had been borrowed from some pitying angel in heaven. Rupert turned his head, then looked again, thinking that it would be gone; but no, it still was there, and now he could even see the hand beneath the chin and the quivering of the lips which strove to stifle back a sob.

"Mea," he said, in English, "why do you cry?"

She sprang up, dashing the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I no cry," she answered, in a merry voice. "Bey, you not hear me cry."

"No, Mea; but I saw you. Your cheek was all wet, and you sat with your chin upon your hand."

She uttered some Arabic exclamation of joy, then snatched the linen veil or wimple from her head and threw it over his face.

"Look no more," she said, "not good for your eye to look too much or you go blind again. Also," she added, with a happy laugh, "great shame of you to spy upon a lady when she no think you see. You should tell her first you going look, then she put on proper face."

"I don't want to see any other," answered Rupert gently. "At first I thought that I dreamt, and that it was an angel, only angels don't cry."

"I think that angels cry always if they see down here—such a lot to cry over, Rupert Bey."

Then she tried to control herself for a moment, and failed miserably, for she began to weep and sob outright. She threw herself upon her knees beside him and said:

"You ask me why I cry, I (*sob*) tell you (*sob*) all the truth. Because you made like that for me, and—I no can bear it, it break my heart, for my heart love you very much, you want to die for me; I—I want to live for you."

Rupert sat up on the angarib, throwing the white veil from his head, whereon, at once forgetting herself in the danger to his new-born sight, she placed her little hand across his eyes, and held it there. The crisis had come, and he knew it; but how to deal with it, he did not know.

"Don't do that, dear Mea," he said, in a troubled voice. "If you think the light will harm me, tie the veil over my eyes. Then we will talk."

She came behind him and obeyed, while Rupert felt her hot tears falling on his hair. It was an awful moment, but he sat still, holding the bedstead with his hand and uttering no tender word of the many that rushed unbidden to his lips.

"Now, Mea," he said, "sit down; no, not on the angarib—there on the stool."

"I sit," she answered humbly. "Talk on."

"Mea," he continued, with a desperate effort, "all this won't do. You are sorry for me, and it upsets you and makes you say things you must not. Mea, I am married."

He stopped, but she made no answer. He began to wonder what she was doing, or if she had gone away and left him, as he devoutly hoped.

Unable to bear it any more he pushed the bandage from his forehead. No; there she sat silent and pained.

"I am married," he remarked again, not knowing what else to say.

Then she looked up and asked: "You hate me, Rupert Bey?"

"Of course not," he answered indignantly; "very much the reverse."

"I thank you. Then you think me not nice, ugly?"

"Indeed, no. You are one of the most beautiful women I ever saw."

"I thank you," she said again. "I like hear you say that though you no mean it. Then you angry with me because you lose your foot and eye and get your people killed, though that old Bakhita's fault, not mine."

"Please don't think so, Mea. It was not you or Bakhita, it was what you call Kismet."

"Yes, I think it Kismet too. Kismet all round, Kismet here," and she laid her hand upon her bosom. "Well, then, you not hate, you not think ugly, you not angry, and I—oh! I *love*," and she put such tender passion into the word that the room seemed full of it—"and I great lady too in my own place, I, Tama, not dirt-born. Why you no take me? See now!" and she stood up before him and turned slowly round, "I not beautiful as you say, too small, too thin, but I not so bad! I make you good wife, I give you children, I love you always till I die. My people hate strangers, still they very glad you take me, they love you too, they praise you much, they think you bravest man in world; my emirs ask me this morning if I married to you yet as they want make feast."

Rupert pulled down the bandage over his eyes again; he thought it best, muttering something about the light hurting him.

"Mea," he said, in despair, "don't you understand that I am already married?"

"What that matter?" she asked. "Man can have two wives, four if he like."

"He can't," answered Rupert. "I beg you—don't go on. It is not right; it is more than I can bear. By our English law, he can only have one wife, no one else—no one at all. You must have heard it."

"Oh, yes, I hear, there at Luxor, but I think that all silly missionary talk. White people do many things they say they should not do—I see them and make note. Who know how many wives you have? But if you no want me, *mafeesh*—all done with. I not trouble you any more; I go and die, that all."

"Unless you stop soon, you will make me go and die," he said faintly. "Mea, it is cruel of you to talk like that. Listen now, and do not be angry, do not think that I am treating you ill. Oh, my dearest friend, sit there and listen!"

Then giving up English, in which she would have found it difficult to understand his arguments, he addressed her in Arabic, expounding our Western doctrines and showing her that what she thought right and proper, in the West was held a crime; that he had passed his word, and it could not be broken, that he would rather die than break it, that his honour was on it, and that if he violated his honour, his soul would be as scarred and mutilated as his body was that day.

Mea listened intently, and at last began to understand.

"Now are you angry with me?" he ended. "And do you still wish me to stay here when I tell you that if I do there must be no more of this love-talk between us, which, in the end, might bring me to ruin? If that is too much to ask, then to-morrow I go hence into the desert to—" and he stopped.

"Nay," she replied, in Arabic, "I am not angry with you, Rupert Bey. I am angry with myself who tempted you to break your own law. Oh! you are good, the best of men that I have known, and I will learn to be good like you—only tell me not that I must cease to love you, for that I cannot do; and oh! speak no more of going hence into the desert to die, for then I should die also. Nay, bide here and be my friend and brother since you may not be my husband. Stay and forgive me who am ignorant, who have other customs, and was not taught thus. Say that you will stay."

"Yes," he answered, in a hoarse voice, for he was more affected than he dared to show, "I will stay till I can find an opportunity of going home; and oh! Mea, do not suppose that I think the worse of you. I honour you, Mea; next to my wife and mother, you are the dearest to me of any in the world. While I live, I will remain your friend. See, this is the token of it;" and leaning forward, he searched for her hand and found it, then lifted it to his forehead and touched it with his lips. Next instant he heard the rustle of her robes as she left the room.

Thus did Rupert keep the oath that he had sworn to his mother years before and come out safely from the fires of a very fierce dilemma, and thus did a star arise upon the twilight of Mea's soul—a far, cold star, that yet was destined to lead her on to wondrous heights, whence the way of the flesh seemed very distant, and that of the spirit very near.

CHAPTER XV

RUPERT MAKES OBEISANCE

For three days after the passionate scene that has been described, Rupert saw no more of Mea. When he asked about her, not without anxiety, Bakhita, who had taken her place as his nurse, informed him that she had gone to a distant part of the oasis to inquire about her crops, and to settle a dispute between two families as to some land. For some reasons he wished that she would come back again, since during those days Bakhita was very short with him; indeed, the word "harsh" would scarcely have exaggerated her attitude.

"I know you are angry with me," he said at last; "but you who are wise and acquainted with our law, will understand."

"I understand that you are a fool, Rupert Bey, like many of you white men who think yourselves so good and clever. I wish you had never come to Tama, for now my niece will go unmarried, and the ancient race must die."

"It is not my fault," he answered humbly, "it is yours, Bakhita, who would accompany me somewhat against my will, and thus have brought ruin upon everybody."

"Nay," she answered crossly, "it was yours, who spied upon us in the sanctuary at Abu-Simbel, and thus caused the libation to be poured amiss. From that moment Tama became your slave, and the god grew jealous and brought evil upon us all, especially upon you, Rupert Bey."

He laughed a little and said:

"You don't really believe all that, do you, Bakhita? Those old gods have been dead for many an age."

"I am not sure what I believe," she answered; "but departed faiths still haunt the blood of those whose fathers held them, and the ancient gods live on in other forms. To-day none worship ours, save I, for Mea turned from him to you, and the people have forgotten long ago. Well, I was sure that ill-luck would come, and so it has. Still, I do not blame you, Rupert Bey, who are brave and honest, and have dealt well by her whom you might have betrayed and left. Nor," she added, with a curious burst of conviction—"nor am I sure that things will go so ill after all. You said to us one day that the spirit is greater than the flesh, and that those who follow the spirit win at last. Though you seem such a fool, perhaps you are right, Rupert Bey. I think so at times, for, look you, I also have put aside the flesh and followed the spirit all my life, and learned much, for do they not call me wise and foresighted? Only," she added reflectively, "perhaps I have followed the false spirit, and you follow the true. Perhaps the old gods are really dead at last, and new ones rule the world. But if so, in the Soudan they are devils. Meanwhile, Rupert Bey, deal gently with the flower whose stalk you have broken in your clumsy hand, lest the air should soon lack its fragrance."

On the third day Mea reappeared, looking rather pale and red-eyed, but outwardly, at any rate, in a cheerful mood. Not one word did she say then or afterwards to Rupert about their great argument as to the moralities of the East and West. For whether she had been visiting her crops, or perchance lying weeping on her bed, at least it would seem that she had conquered herself, and was determined to adapt her life to the conditions upon which they had tacitly agreed. By now it was certain that his sight would be restored to Rupert, and this joyful fact worked wonders for them both. For instance, mounted on a quiet mule, which a servant led, whilst others

ran before, behind, and around him, and Mea herself rode at his side, she conducted him about the oasis that was her heritage.

It was a large place, thirty miles or more in length by perhaps fifteen in breadth, which would have supported a great population, as once it must have done, for its soil, washed down from the mountain-sides, was of a marvellous fertility and very well-watered. The local methods of cultivation, however, were primitive, and as the trade with outside people was very small, its inhabitants had no incentive to grow more than they could consume.

"If I had the management of this oasis for ten years," said Rupert to Mea, after he had inspected most of it, "I would make you the richest woman in the Soudan."

"Then stay and make me so," she answered, smiling. But he felt that it was not the riches which she desired.

What interested him even more were the ruins of the great temple which had evidently been devoted to the worship of Ra—that is, the Sun as the robe and symbol of Divinity. It was of a late period, Ptolemaic indeed, and not of the best workmanship, and there were various passages in the inscriptions which seemed to suggest that it was founded by some Egyptian prince of the thirtieth dynasty, who fled hither after the reconquest of Egypt by the Persians. It appeared that his descendants for many generations kept a kind of royal state in this far-off oasis where nobody thought it worth while to attack them. Indeed, on the sarcophagus of one of them who died as late as the reign of Theodosius four centuries after Christ, was an inscription pompously describing the deceased as "Beloved of Ra, King of Tama and of Upper and Lower Egypt."

The most impressive part of this temple, indeed, was the mausoleum of the rulers of the oasis who had called themselves kings. Probably because they could not afford to make for themselves great separate tombs after the fashion

of those in the Valley of Kings at Thebes, they hollowed in the rock beneath the temple a vast crypt, from which opened outside chambers like to those of the Serapeum, the burying-place of the sacred bulls of Memphis. At the head of this crypt stood a huge and solemn statue of Osiris in his mummy wrappings, but wearing the crown and feathers of Amen-Ra, and at its entrance was a great underground pool or cistern of water, across which the bodies of the dead were ferried, in imitation, doubtless, of the last journey across the Nile. Certain of the side-chambers were bricked up, but others were either never closed, or had been opened, and there in their sarcophagi lay the dead.

In a past age some of the granite coverings and coffin-lids had been removed, but the mummies remained inviolate, even their golden ornaments were not disturbed. Those of one young queen, or rather chieftainess, who had died a few years before the birth of Christ were indeed of remarkable beauty and great value, comprising a crown of gold filagree and enamelled flowers of marvellous workmanship, inlaid pectoral and bracelets and a sceptre of gold surmounted by a crystal symbol of the sun. Mea took them from the body and arrayed herself in them and stood before Rupert a queen of Egypt, as once he had seen her stand in the sanctuary at Abu-Simbel. Very wonderful she looked thus with the lamp-light shining upon her in that awesome, silent place.

"What are you doing?" he asked, for notwithstanding the bizarre beauty of her decorations, it jarred upon him to see her ornamented with these insignia of death.

"I try them on, Rupert Bey," she answered. "As we cannot make such things now I will borrow them from the lady, my long-ago grandmother, to be buried in. Come here; I show you my tomb."

Then she led the way past certain built-up chambers in which, she informed him, her immediate predecessors lay uncoffined, to a recess where was a magnificent sarcophagus

of alabaster. It was graved about with the usual texts from the Book of the Dead, but had several peculiarities. Thus in its great interior were places for two bodies with a little ridge of alabaster left to separate them. It was quite empty, the massive lid which stood by its side never having been put on. Also the spaces for the name, or names, of its occupants were left blank, showing that those for whom it was prepared rested elsewhere.

"Where are they?" asked Rupert, as with the help of Mea and his crutch he scrambled down from the pediment of the tomb.

"Don't know," she answered; "perhaps die somewhere else, or killed by enemy; perhaps quarrel, and no wish to be buried together. I take their house when my time comes; just fit me."

"Then you mean your husband to lie there too?" blurted out Rupert, without thinking.

Holding the lamp in her hand she turned and looked at him with steady eyes.

"Understand, Rupert Bey," she said, "I have no husband, never—never. All day I work alone, when night come I sleep alone. Then my people build up this place—all, all, for I the last and nobody ever come in here any more. Yes, build it up with stone of the temple and make it solid like the mountain, for I wish to sleep long and quiet."

Such were the oasis Tama and its antiquities. Of its people there is little to say, save that they were grave in demeanour, rather light in colour and handsome in appearance, especially the women, looking much as the last descendants of an ancient and high-bred race might be expected to look. The men, as we have seen, were brave enough in war, suspicious and exclusive also, but indolent at home, doing no more work than was necessary, and for the most part lacking the energy to trade. Their customs as regards marriage and other matters were those common to Nubia and the Soudan, but although

they talked of Allah they were not Mahommedans, and if they worshipped anything, it was God as symbolised by the sun. Indeed this was all that remained of their ancient faith, with the exception of certain feasts and days of mourning, whereof they had long forgotten the origin. Only a few of the old women before a marriage or a burial, or any other event of importance, would occasionally creep down to the vault and pour a libation to the statue of Osiris that wore the crown and feathers of Amen-Ra, as, in an hour of danger, Bakhita had made Mea do at Abu-Simbel.

This survival was interesting, but Rupert was never able to discover whether it had descended from the ancient days, or whether they had learnt the practice from the sculptures on the temple and the paintings in the vault, which showed the departed rulers and their wives and attendants pouring such libations before this very statue. At least, of the old religion nothing else remained, nor could anyone in Tama read the hieroglyphics. It was her desire to acquire this and other learning, and to become acquainted with those men and the wonderful outside world, whereof rumours had reached her in her isolated solitude, that had caused Mea to disguise herself and spend two years at the school at Luxor. Here, although, as she found to her disappointment, they did not teach hieroglyphics, she had accumulated a considerable quantity of miscellaneous knowledge of men and things, including a superficial acquaintance with the English tongue, in which she loved to talk.

Now she insisted upon continuing her education under Rupert's guidance, and as they had only one book, the instruction took the form of lectures upon history, literature, art, and everything else under the sun with which he had the slightest acquaintance. It was a strange sight to see them in one of the big rooms of her house, Mea seated at a little table and Rupert limping to and fro upon his crutch, and holding forth on all things, human and Divine, such as Egyptology—of

which he really knew something; modern political history, especially that of Africa, and religion. Indeed, the last played a large part in their studies, for as it happened among the few belongings that were saved from the saddle-bags of his camel, was Rupert's Bible, that same skin-bound volume which had excited Edith's wonder and interest. Therefore it was out of this Bible that he made her read to him, with the result that she learned from it more than the letter. As he intended that she should, soon she began to appreciate the spirit also, and in its light to understand much that had puzzled her in Rupert's conduct towards herself and others. But the knowledge did not teach her to love him less, only perhaps she honoured him the more.

So the weeks passed on, and strange as were the conditions of his life, not altogether unhappily for Rupert. As yet it was impossible for him to leave the oasis for the reasons that have been given, and sometimes with a sudden sense of shame, he awoke to the fact that this detention was no longer the agony to him that it had been at first; that now indeed he could endure it with patience. Of course the truth was that we are all of us very much the creatures of our immediate surroundings, and that the atmosphere of this peaceful desert home had crept into his being, bringing with it rest, if not content. He had suffered so much in mind and body, and now he was not called upon to suffer. So skilful was she in her dealings with him, so well did she veil her heart in its wrappings of courtesy and friendship, that he ceased even, or at any rate to a great extent, to be anxious about Mea.

He tried to forget that passionate scene, and when he did think of it his modesty prompted him to believe that it really meant nothing. Eastern women were, he knew, very impulsive, also very changeful. Probably what had moved her, although at the time she did not know it, was not devotion to a shattered hulk of a man like himself, but as she had said at the beginning, pity for his sad state of which indirectly she was the cause.

At least he hoped that it was so, and what we hope earnestly in time we may come to believe. So that trouble was smoothed away, or at any rate remained in abeyance.

For the rest those palms and mountain-tops, those bubbling waters and green fields, that solemn, ruined temple and those towering pylons, were better than the parks and streets of London, or that hateful habitation in Grosvenor Square where Lord Devene leant against his haunted marble mantel-piece and mocked. Indeed, had it not been for Edith and his mother, Rupert would, he felt, be content, now that his career had gone, to renounce the world and live in Tama all his days. But these two—the wife who must think herself a widow, and the mother who believed herself sonless, he longed ceaselessly to see again. For their sakes, day by day he watched for an opportunity of escape.

At length it came.

"Rupert Bey," said Mea quietly to him one morning in Arabic as they sat down to their usual lesson, "I have good news for you. By this time to-morrow you may be gone from here," and whilst pretending to look down at the parchment upon which she was writing with a reed pen, as her forefathers might have done twenty centuries before—for paper was scarce with them—she watched his face from beneath her long lashes.

The intelligence stunned him a little, preventing—perhaps fortunately—any outbreak of exuberant joy. Indeed, he only answered in the words of the Arabic proverb:

"After calm, storm; after peace, war," and the reply seemed to satisfy Mea, although she knew that this proverb had an end to it—"after death, paradise—or hell."

"How, Mea?" he asked presently.

"A big caravan, too strong to be attacked, is going to cross the Nile above Wady-Halfa and pass through the Nubian desert to the shores of the Red Sea beyond the country that is held by Osman Digna. Its chief, who is known to our people, and a true man, makes the pilgrimage to Mecca. I have sent

messengers to him. He is willing that you should accompany him, only you must not say who you are, and if they meet any white men you must promise not to talk to them. Otherwise, you may bring him into trouble for the befriending of a Christian."

"I will promise that," answered Rupert.

"Good! Then you leave here to-morrow morning at the dawn. Now, let us go on with the lesson; it is my last."

That lesson proved a very desultory performance; indeed, it consisted chiefly of a compilation by Rupert of lists of books, which he instructed Mea she was to send to Egypt to buy, as soon as there was an opportunity, in order that she might continue her education by herself. But Mea seemed to have lost all interest in the future improvement of her mind.

What was the good of learning, she asked, if there was nobody to talk to of what she had learned? Bakhita did not care for these things, and the others had never heard of them.

Still she took the lists and said she would send for the books when she could, that was, after the country grew quiet.

The rest of that miserable day went by somehow. There were meals to eat as usual; also Rupert's dromedary had to be got up, and a store of food made ready for his journey. Mea wanted him to take money, of which she had a certain amount hidden away—several thousand pounds indeed—the products of her share of sales of horses and corn which the tribe occasionally effected with travelling merchants, who bought from them cheap and sold to the Egyptian Government, or others, dear. But this he would not touch, nor did he need to do so, for in his clothes when he was captured were sewn about a hundred pounds, some in gold and some in bank-notes, which he thought would be sufficient to take him to England.

. . . . . .

It was night. All was prepared. Rupert had said his

farewells to the emirs and chief men, who seemed very sorry that he was going. Mea had vanished somewhere, and he did not know whether he would see her again before he started at the dawn. The moon shone brightly, and accompanied by the native dog that had led him when he was blind, and having become attached to him, scenting separation with the strange instinct of its race, refused to leave his side that day, Rupert took his crutch and walked through the pylon of the temple, partly in the hope that he might meet Mea, and partly to see it once more at the time of full moon, when its ruin looked most beautiful.

Through the hypostyle hall he went where owls flitted among the great columns, till he came to the entrance of the vast crypt, a broad rock-slope, down which in old days the sarcophagi were dragged. Here he stopped, seating himself upon the head of a fallen statue, and fell into a reverie, from which he was roused by the fidgeting and low growlings of the dog, that ran down the slope and returned again as though he wished to call his attention to something below.

At length his curiosity was excited, and led by the dog, Rupert descended the long slope at the foot of which lay the underground pool of water. Before he reached its end he saw a light, and limping on quietly, perceived by its rays Bakhita and Mea, the former bending over the pool, and the latter wrapped in a dark cloak, seated native fashion at its edge. Guessing that the old gipsy was celebrating another of her ancient ceremonies, he motioned the dog to heel, stood still and watched.

Presently he saw her thrust out from the side of the pool a boat about as large as that which boys sail upon the waters of the London parks. It was built upon the model of the ancient Egyptian funerary barges with a half deck forward, upon which lay something that looked like a little mummy. Also, it had a single sail set. Bakhita gave it a strong push, so that it

floated out into the middle of the pool, which was of the size of a large pond where, the momentum being exhausted, it lay idly. Now the old woman stretched out a wand she held and uttered a kind of invocation, which, so far as he could hear and understand it, ran:

"Boat, boat, thou that bearest what was his, do my bidding. Sail north, sail south, sail east, sail west, sail where his feet shall turn, and where his feet shall bide, there stay. Boat, boat, let his Double set thy sail. Boat, boat, let his Spirit breathe into thy sail. Boat, boat, in the name of Ra, lord of life, in the name of Osiris, lord of death, I bid thee bring that which was his, to north, south, east, or west, where he shall bide at last. Boat, boat, obey!" *

She ceased and watched a little lamp which burnt upon the prow of the boat, in front of the object that looked like a toy mummy. Mea also rose and watched, while out of the darkness Rupert and the dog watched too. For a little while the boat remained still, then one of the numerous draughts that blew about these caverns seemed to catch its sail, and slowly it drew away across the water.

"It goes west," whispered Mea.

"Aye," answered Bakhita; "west as he does. But will it bide in the west?"

"I pray not," answered Mea, "since ever from of old the west has been the land of death, and therefore to the west of these waters lie the sepulchres, and where the sun sets beyond the west bank of the Nile, there for thousands of years our people laid their dead. Nay, boat, tarry not in the west where Osiris rules, the cold and sorrowful west. Return, return to the House of Ra, and in his light abide."

Thus she murmured on, like one who makes a song to

* The Double and the Spirit here mentioned were doubtless those constituent parts of the human entity which were known respectively to the old Egyptians as the Ka (the Double), and the Khu (the Soul itself). Of these, some traditional knowledge might very well have descended to Bakhita.

herself in the Eastern fashion, all the while intently watching the little lamp that showed the position of the boat. Having reached the western edge of the pool, it seemed inclined to remain there, whereon Mea, turning to Bakhita, began to scold her, asking her why she had brought her there to see this childish play, and whether she thought that she, Mea, who had been educated at Luxor and received many lessons from the Bey, believed in her silly magic, or that a toy boat, even though it did carry a man's foot made up like a mummy, could possibly tell whither he would wander.

"If the boat sails right, then you will believe; if it sails wrong, then you will not believe. That I expected, and it is best," answered Bakhita drily, and at that moment something happened to the little lamp that stood before the mummy foot, for suddenly it went out.

Now Mea grew positively angry, and spoke sharp words to Bakhita as to her methods of divination and the benighted and primitive condition of her intelligence in general.

"Were I to accept the augury of your boat," she said, "I must be sure not only that he will stay in the west, but that he will die there, for look, the light is out."

"Other things die beside men's bodies," answered Bakhita, in her brief fashion; "their hopes, or beliefs, or perhaps their good luck—who can say?"

As she spoke, suddenly out from the darkness of the pool into the ring of light cast by the lamp which Bakhita bore, that fairy boat came gliding. The gust of wind blowing down the western sepulchres beyond the pool, which extinguished its lamp, had also caught its sail and brought it back, half filled with water shipped in turning; brought it back swiftly, but sailing straight to where Mea knelt upon the edge of the pool. She saw it, and with a little cry of joy, bent herself over the water, and stretching out her rounded arms, caught the boat just before it sank, and hugged it to her breast.

"Put the thing down," said Bakhita. "You don't believe

in it, and it is wet and will spoil your robe. Nay, the Bey's foot is mine, not yours. I brought it from the Wells."

Then they began to quarrel over this poor mummied relic of which Rupert thought that he had seen the last many a day before, while he took an opportunity to beat his retreat. Bakhita and her ancient spells were, as usual, interesting, though when they involved a lost fragment of himself they became somewhat gruesome. But in such things he had no belief whatsoever; they only attracted him as historical, or rather as spiritual survivals. What moved him about the matter was Mea's part in it, revealing, as it did, that her interest in his future had in no way abated. Indeed, he felt that it would be long before he was able to forget the touching sight of this wayward and beautiful girl, this desert-bred daughter of kings, snatching the sinking boat and its grizzly burden from the water and pressing them to her breast as though they were a living child. Meanwhile, the accident that he had seen it did not make this farewell less difficult.

When at length he reached the house—for amongst the fallen stones of the temple his progress with a crutch was slow—Rupert sat down upon its steps, feeling sure that Mea would wish to see him, and that it would be well to get that parting over. Presently the mongrel at his side began to bark, and next minute he saw her walking slowly up the path towards him, her cloak open and the breast of her robe still wet where she had pressed the dripping boat against it. He struggled from the step to meet her.

"Sit, Rupert Bey," she said; "sit. Why trouble you to rise for me?"

"I cannot sit while you stand," he answered.

"Then I sit also, on the other side of the dog. He look like the god on the wall, does he not, what you call him—Anubis, brother of Osiris? No, don't growl at me, Anubis; I no hurt your master, you nasty little god of the dead."

"Where have you been, and why is your dress wet?" asked Rupert.

"Ask Anubis here, he wise, knows as much as his master. I been to the burying-place and lean over holy water to look if I grow more ugly than usual."

"Stuff!" answered Rupert.

"You no believe me? Well, then, perhaps I thirsty and drink water. Much weep make me thirsty. No believe still? Then perhaps I look in water and see pictures there."

"What pictures can you see in that dark place?"

"Oh, plenty, dark no matter. See things inside, like you when you blind. I tell you what I see; I see you come back here, and so I weep no more. I—I—happy. Make that dog go the other side. He want to bite me now, he jealous because you look at me, not him."

Accordingly the protesting Anubis was rearranged, and continued his snarlings and grumblings from a safer distance.

"Some more of old Bakhita's nonsense, I suppose," said Rupert. "I thought that you had given up believing in her myths and omens."

"What mean myths and omens? No matter; Bakhita old fool, gods old stones, believe in none of them. You say it, so all right. Believe in you, and me—inside, what my heart tell me. My heart tell me you come back. That why I happy."

"Then I am afraid, Mea, that your heart knows more than I do."

"Yes," she answered, "think more; feel more, so know more. *That* all right; what do you expect?" Then suddenly dropping her jerky and peculiar English, Mea addressed him in her solemn and native Arabic. "Hark you, Rupert, guest of my home, guest of my heart, preserver of my body, who shed your blood for me. You think me foolish, one who tries to warm her hands at the fires of the marsh, one who plucks flowers that fade, and believes them immortal stars fallen

to deck her breast and hair. Yet she finds warmth in the marsh fire, and in the dead flower's heart a star. I believe that you will come back, why or how it matters not, but to make sure you shall swear an oath to me, you shall swear it by the name of your Jesus, for then it will not be broke."

"What oath?" asked Rupert anxiously.

"This: Sometimes lamps go out, and where we thought light was there is great blackness. Sometimes hopes fail, and death stands where life should have been. This may chance to you, Rupert Bey, yonder in the cold, western land of the setting sun."

"Do you mean that I shall find my wife dead?" he asked, with a quiver in his voice. "Is that the picture you saw in your pool?"

"Nay; I saw it not; I do not know. I think she lives and is well. But there are other sorts of death. Faith can die, hope can die, love can die. I tell you I know not, I know nothing; I have no magic; I believe in no divination. I only believe in what my heart tells me, and perchance it tells me wrong. Still I ask you to swear this. If things should so befall that there is nothing more to keep you in the West, if you should need to find new faith, new hope, new love, then that you will come back to Tama and to me. Swear it now by the name of your God, Jesus; so I may be sure that you will keep the oath."

"I do not swear by that name," he answered. "Moreover why should I swear at all?"

"For my sake, Rupert Bey, you will. Hear me and decide. I tell you that if you do not come back, then I die. I do not ask to be your wife, that does not matter to me, but I ask to see you day by day. If I do not see you, then I die."

"But, Mea," he said, "it may be impossible. You know why."

"If it is impossible, so be it, I die. Then it is better that I die. Perhaps I kill myself, I do not know, at any rate I go

away. I ask not that you should swear to come, if it should make you break your oath to others, only if there are no more oaths to keep. Now choose, Rupert Bey. Give me life or give me death, as you desire. Make your decree. I shall not be angry. Declare your will that your servant may obey," and she rose and stood before him with bent head and hands humbly crossed upon her breast.

He looked at her. There could be no doubt she was in earnest. Mea meant what she said, and she said that if he did not gratify this strange wish of hers, and refused to give her any hope of his return, she would die, or at least so he understood her; and was certain that if she had the hope, she would not die and bring her blood upon his head. Rupert looked at her again, standing there in the moonlight like some perfect statue of humility, and his spirit melted within him, a blush of shame spread itself over his scarred and rugged features, shame that this loyal-hearted and most honoured woman should thus lay her soul naked before him, saying that it must starve if he would not feed it with the crumb of comfort that it desired. Then he hesitated no longer.

"Mea," he said, in the kind and pleasant voice that was perhaps his greatest charm—"Mea, my law says: 'Swear not at all'; I read it to you the other day. Now, Mea, will my word do instead?"

"My lord's word is as other men's oaths," she answered, lifting her humble eyes a little.

Then he bent forward, resting on his knee, not as an act of adoration, but because it was difficult to him to rise without assistance, and stretching out his hand, took her crossed hands from her breast, and bowing himself, pressed them against his forehead, thus—as she, an Eastern, knew well—prostrating himself before her, making the ancient obeisance that a man can only make with honour to his liege sovereign, or to one who has conquered him.

"My lady Tama," he went on, "after one other my life is

yours, for you gave it back to me, and after her and my mother there lives no woman whom I honour half so much as you, my lady and my friend. Therefore, Mea, since you wish it, and think that it would make you happier, should I perchance be left alone—which God forbid!—I promise you that I will come to you and spend my life with you until you weary of me—not as a husband, which you say you do not desire, which also might be impossible, but as a brother and a friend. Is that what you wish me to say?" and he loosed her hand, bowed to her once more in the Eastern fashion, with his own outstretched, so that his fingers just touched her feet, and raised himself to the step again.

"Oh!" she answered, in deep and thrilling tones, "all, all! More, by far, than I had hoped. Now I will not die; I will live! Yes, I will keep my life like a jewel beyond price, because I shall know, even if you do not come, that you may come some time, and that if you never come, yet you would have come if you could—that the marsh-light is true fire, and that the flower will one day be a star. For soon or late we shall meet again, Rupert Bey! Only, you should not have prostrated yourself to me, who am all unworthy. Well, I will work, I will learn, I will become worthy. A gift, my lord! Leave me that holy book of yours, that I may study it and believe what you believe."

He limped into the house and brought back the tattered old Bible bound in buckskin.

"You couldn't have asked for anything that I value more, Mea," he said, "for I have had that book since I was a child, and for that reason I am very glad to give it to you. Only read it for its own sake—not for mine—and believe for Truth's sake, not because it would please me."

"I hear and I obey," she said, as she took the book and thrust it into the bosom of her loose robe.

Then for a moment they stood facing each other in silence, till at length, perhaps because she was unable to speak, she

lifted her hands, held them over him as though in blessing, then turned and glided away into the shadows of the night.

He did not see her any more.

CHAPTER XVI

MEANWHILE

IT was the last day of the old year when, had there been anyone to take interest in her proceedings among so many finer vessels going to or returning from their business on the great waters, a black and dirty tramp steamer, whose trade it was to carry coals to the East, might have been seen creeping up the Thames with the tide. A light but greasy fog hung over the face of the river, making navigation difficult, and blurring the outlines of the buildings on its bank, and through it the sound of the church bells—for it was Sunday—floated heavily, as though their clappers had been muffled in honour of the decease of one of the great ones of the earth.

In his cabin—for after the suns of the Soudan the winter wind was too cold to face—sat Rupert Ullershaw, dressed in a mustard-coloured suit of reach-me-downs, somewhat too small for him, and of a peculiarly hideous cut and pattern, which he had purchased from a sailor. Physically he was in good health, but his mental condition may best be described as one of nervous irritability born of weeks and months of suspense. What news awaited him on his arrival home, he wondered, and how would he, a discredited and mutilated cripple, be received?

That he was discredited he knew already, for he had found an old paper on board the ship, in which, on looking at it, his own name had leapt to his eye. Someone had asked a question in Parliament concerning him and his mission—why it had been sent, what were the facts of the rumours of its annihila-

tion, whether it was true that this disaster had been brought about through the envoy, Lieutenant-Colonel Ullershaw, C.B., having mixed himself up in tribal quarrels over a native woman, and what was the pecuniary loss involved to the country? Then followed the answer of the Secretary of State, the man who had pressed him to go on the grounds of duty and patriotism. It stated that Colonel Ullershaw had been despatched to carry out certain confidential negotiations with a number of sheiks on the borders of the Soudan. That according to the report received from the Egyptian authorities, a native sergeant named Abdullah, who accompanied him, had arrived at Cairo and informed them that all the members of the mission, who were disguised as merchants, had been attacked by a petty chief called Ibrahim and destroyed, Abdullah alone escaping. That it appeared from this survivor's evidence that the attack was not political, but had its origin in Colonel Ullershaw having unfortunately tried to protect two native women who were travelling with him, one of whom, stated to be a young person of some rank, was claimed by the sheik Ibrahim as a wife. That the loss to the country, or rather to the Egyptian Government, amounted to about two thousand pounds, of which one thousand was in cash.

Arising out of this were other questions, evidently framed to annoy the Government upon a small matter, such as: Was it true that Colonel Ullershaw had been chosen over the heads of more suitable persons, because his great family influence had been brought to bear upon the War Office? To this the answer was that the deceased officer's record had been very distinguished, and he was chosen because of his diplomatic experience, his knowledge of Arabic and personal acquaintance with the sheiks, with whom it was necessary to communicate: That, as the House would be aware, his family influence as represented in that House, and, he might add, in another place, was not likely to unduly influence Her Majesty's present

advisers, of whom the gentlemen concerned were strong and able opponents. (A laugh.)

The thirst for information not being yet appeased, an Irish member asked whether it was true that a punitive expedition had been sent to kill the chief whose wife Colonel Ullershaw had stolen—(laughter); and whether the Government now regretted their choice of Colonel Ullershaw as the head of this mission.

Answer: That such an expedition had been sent, but that it appeared that Colonel Ullershaw and his party had made a very gallant fight before they were overwhelmed, and that either he, or, as was stated by some nomads, the lady, whom he had befriended, with the help of her tribesmen had already killed the sheik Ibrahim and most of his men, whose corpses had been seen by the nomads hanging to some trees: That the Government admitted that their choice had not been justified by events, but that he, the Secretary of State, deprecated the casting of slurs upon very insufficient information upon the memory of a brave and devoted servant of his country—(hear, hear!)—whose mistakes, whatever they might have been, seemed to have sprung from the exaggerated chivalry of his nature. (A laugh.)

Another Irish member: Was it true that Colonel Ullershaw had been married on the day he left England to enter upon this mission? The Speaker: "Order, order. This House has nothing to do with the domestic concerns of the late Colonel Ullershaw."

The Honourable member apologised for his question, remarking that his excuse for it must be that the country, or Egypt, had to pay in lives and money for the domestic entanglements of Colonel Ullershaw, in which he became involved among the desert sands. (Much laughter and cries of order.) He wished to ask the Right Honourable gentleman whether he was sure that the gallant Colonel—(more laughter)—was really dead?

The Secretary of War: "I fear there is no doubt upon that point."

The subject then dropped.

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Turning over the paper in a dazed fashion—for the cruelty and injustice of these questions and the insinuations so lightly made for party purposes cut him to the heart—Rupert had come upon a sub-leader which discussed the matter in a tone of solemn ignorance. Being an Opposition organ, the leader-writer of the journal seemed to assume that the facts were correctly stated, and that the unfortunate officer concerned brought about the failure of the mission and lost his own life by a course of action so foolish as to be discreditable, in which, as it stated, "the ever-present hand of female influence can unfortunately be traced." It added that deeply as the death of a man who had served his country well and gallantly in the past was to be regretted, perhaps for Colonel Ullershaw it was the best thing that could have happened, since it seemed probable that in any event his career would have been at an end.

After reading this report and comment, Rupert's common-sense and knowledge of official ways assured him that, however unjustly, he was in all probability a ruined man. On the charges about the lady in the desert he might, it is true, be able to put a different complexion, but it would be impossible for him to deny that the unfortunate presence of Bakhita and Mea had been the immediate cause of his disaster, or indeed that he had been spending several months as their guest. Beyond these details, however, lay the crushing fact that he who had been expected to succeed, had utterly and completely failed, and by failing, exposed those who employed him to sharp criticism and unpleasant insinuations. Lastly, the circumstance that he was now a hopeless cripple would of course be taken advantage of to dispense with his further services.

So convinced was he of the desperate nature of his plight that he had not even attempted to offer any explanation to the Egyptian Government, as he saw that his only chance lay in influencing those at headquarters and persuading them to order a further local inquiry in Egypt. Besides, he was anxious to get home, and knew that if he had opened up the matter in Cairo, he would probably be detained for months, and very possibly be put under arrest pending investigations.

Rupert's journey across the desert had been long, but unmarked by any incident or danger, for they passed round Osman Digna's hordes and through country that was practically depopulated, meeting but few natives and no white men. So far as Rupert was concerned it was comfortable enough; since after the Arab caravan had started from the neighbourhood of Tama, he found to his surprise that Mea had provided him with a guard of twenty of her best men, who brought with them a tent and ample provisions. He ordered them to return, but they refused, saying that they had been commanded by their lady to travel with him to the Red Sea as an escort to the dog Anubis that had insisted upon following him from the town, which dog they were charged to bring back safely when he parted with it at the water. Then understanding what Mea meant by this Eastern subterfuge about the dog and fearing to hurt her feelings, should he insist, he suffered the men to come with him, with the good result that he found himself regarded as a great personage in the caravan.

At length they reached a little port on the Red Sea whence the pilgrims to Mecca proposed to proceed by dhow to Suez, and, as it chanced, found there this English collier that was taking in fresh water. On her Rupert embarked with the pilgrims, passing himself off as one of them, for the captain of the collier was glad to earn a little by taking passengers. The last that he saw of the desert was his Tama escort, who, having

kissed his hand and made their dignified farewells, were turning their camels' heads homewards, the poor cur, Anubis, notwithstanding his howls and struggles, being secured in a basket which was fastened to the side of one of the said camels. No; that was not quite the last, for as the boat rowed out to the steamer which lay at a little distance, it passed a jutting spit of land that gave shelter to the shallow harbour. Of a sudden from this promontory there floated up a sound of wild, sad music, a music of pipes and drums. Rupert recognised it at once; it was the same that he had heard when he rode with Bakhita and Mea from Abu-Simbel, the music of the Wandering Players, those marvellous men who refused baksheesh.

As the morning mist lifted he saw them well, on the sandy beach within twenty yards of the boat. There were the five muffled figures squatted on the ground, three blowing at their pipes and two seated opposite to them beating drums to time. As before they seemed to take not the slightest notice of the passers-by, except that their music grew wilder and more shrill. An English sailor in the boat shouted to them to stop that funeral march and play something funny, but they never lifted their heads, whereon, remarking that theirs was a queer way to earn a living, caterwauling to the birds and fishes, the sailor turned his attention to the tiller and thought no more about them. But even on the ship their melancholy music could be heard floating across the water, although the players themselves were lost in the haze. Indeed, it was while Rupert read the report of what had passed in the House of Commons in the old paper which he found in the deck cabin, that its last wailing burst reached him and slowly faded into silence.

At Suez the pilgrims left the steamer, but as she suited him very well, and the fare demanded did not make any big hole in his £100, he revealed himself as an Englishman and booked a passage on to London. Now London was in sight, yonder it lay beneath that dark mass of cloud, and—what would he find there? He had not telegraphed from Suez or Port Said.

It was, he felt, impossible to explain matters in a cable, and what could be the use, especially as then everything would get into the Press? They thought him dead, or so he gathered from that paper, therefore no one would incur extra suspense or sorrow by waiting for a few more days, to find that he, or some of him, was still alive. He longed to see his wife with a great longing; by day and by night he thought of her, dreaming of the love and sympathy with which she would greet him.

Yet at times doubts did cross his mind, for Edith loved success, and he was now an utter failure, whose misfortunes must involve her also. Could he be the same Rupert Ullershaw who had left Charing Cross railway station nine months before, prosperous, distinguished, chosen for an important mission, with a great career before him? Undoubtedly he was, but all these things had left him; like his body his future was utterly marred, and his present seemed almost shameful. Nothing remained to him now except his wife's love.

He comforted himself. She would not withhold that who had taken him for better or worse; indeed it was the nature of women to show unsuspected qualities when trouble overtook those who were dear to them. No; upon this point he need not torment himself, but there were others.

Was he to tell Edith the dreadful secret of her birth which had haunted him like a nightmare all these weary months? Sooner or later he supposed that it must be done. And must he meet Lord Devene, and if so, what was he to say when they did meet? Then Edith would want to know the truth of this story of the lady in the desert, which, of course, she had a right to learn in its every detail. There was nothing in it. Mea was no more than a dear friend to him; indeed he had thought of her but little lately, whose mind was so preoccupied with other matters. Yet he felt that the tale of their relationship, told exactly as it occurred, and he could repeat it in no other way, might be open to misinterpretation, as the facts of his

escort of her and her aunt across the desert had been already.

Well, she would have to take his word for it, and even if she did not estimate that quite as high as Mea had done, at least she knew that he was no teller of lies. Then after these difficulties were overcome, how was he to live? He had saved a little money, and perhaps as a wounded man they might give him a small pension, out of which his heavy insurance would have to be paid, if indeed it did not absorb it all. There remained her father's—he winced as the word came into his mind—settlement upon Edith, but that income, personally, he would rather starve than touch. Still his wife must be supported in a way commensurate with her position. This outlook, too, was so black that he abandoned its consideration and fell to thinking of the joy of his meeting with his mother.

Here at least there were no ifs or buts. She would understand, she would console; his misfortunes would only make him dearer to her. For the rest, sufficient to the day was its evil the morrow must take care of itself. It was indeed sufficient

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Now while the old tramp lumbers up the Thames through the grey December mist and sleet, let us turn for a few minutes to the fortunes of some of the other personages in this history.

After her husband's departure, Edith returned to live with Mrs. Ullershaw, which was an inexpensive arrangement, and, as she explained to Dick, the right kind of thing to do. Several letters arrived from Rupert, the last written at Abu-Simbel the night before he began his fatal journey, and some were sent in reply which he never received. Then came the long silence, and after it the awful, sudden catastrophe of which they learned first from a Cairo telegram in an evening paper. Rupert was dead, and she, Edith, who had never been a wife, was left a widow. The blow overwhelmed her. All her card castle came tumbling about her ears. Now she could never be the

partner in a brilliant and successful career, and the husband whose virtues she recognised, and of whom she would have been proud, was taken from her into the darkness of a desert grave, he who in due course should have made of her one of the richest peeresses in England. Yes, now those gay dresses must be exchanged for a widow's weeds. She was furious with a Fate that had played such a trick upon her; even her tears were more those of anger than of sorrow, though in her fashion she mourned him truly.

Dick came to console her; he came very soon. Already he had been at the War Office and mastered the points of Abdullah's garbled tale, which, as though unwillingly, he told to Edith, leaving her to put upon it what construction she chose.

"It is nonsense," she said angrily, for in her heart she did not believe it at all. "Poor Rupert would never have got into any silly mess with a savage."

"Of course it is nonsense," he answered, taking her cue; "but it is not a question of morality, it's a question of wisdom. By mixing himself up with these women he brought about the murder of the whole lot and the utter failure of his mission. In a way, it is as well for him that he is gone, poor dear fellow, for he had completely done for himself. Well, it doesn't matter now."

"No," she answered heavily, "it doesn't matter now."

Yet when Dick, as a relative, although of the other political party, was confidentially consulted by the Secretary of State and Lord Southwick before the former gave those answers in the House, he talked somewhat differently, adopting the tone indeed of a tolerant man of the world.

"Of the facts," he said, "he knew little more than they did; but of course poor Ullershaw had his weaknesses like other men," and he smiled as though at amusing recollections, "and the desert was a lonely place, and this Abdullah described

one of the women as young and beautiful. Who could say, and what did it matter?" and so forth.

But the Secretary of State, an austere man who did not like to see his schemes wrecked, and himself attacked on account of such "weaknesses," thought that it mattered a great deal. Hence the tone of his answers in the House, for it never occurred to him, or indeed to Lord Southwick, that a relation would have said as much as Dick did, unless he was very sure of his ground. In fact, they were certain that he was putting forward the best version of the truth and of Ullershaw's character that was possible under the circumstances. Who would wish, they reflected, to throw a darker shade upon the reputation of a dead man than he was absolutely forced to do by the pressure of sure and certain knowledge?

As for Mrs. Ullershaw, when she was assured that this dreadful news was incontrovertible, and that her only son was indeed dead, she said merely in the ancient words: "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," and stumbled to the bed whence she never rose again. Here a second stroke fell upon her, but still for many weeks she lived on in a half-conscious state. It was during this time that Edith left the house, saying that her room was wanted by the nurses, and went into comfortable rooms of her own in Brook Street.

The fact was, of course, that she could no longer endure this atmosphere of sickness. It was repugnant to her nature; the sound of her poor mother-in-law's stertorous breathing as she passed her door tore her nerves, the shadow of advancing death oppressed her spirits which already were low enough. So she went and set up a *ménage* of her own as a young widow had a right to do. As for Mrs. Ullershaw, by degrees she sank into complete insensibility and so died, making no sign. A week before Rupert reached England she was buried in Brompton Cemetery by the side of the husband who had treated her so ill in life.

It was a little before this that an event occurred which indirectly lessened Edith's material disappointment, and consoled Lord Devene for the death of Rupert that for his own reasons had grieved and disappointed him much. To the astonishment of all the world, on one fine autumn morning Tabitha presented him with a singularly healthy son.

"This one should do!" exclaimed the doctor in triumph, while Lord Devene kissed it fondly.

But when they had left the room together, his wife bade the nurse show her the child, and after she too had kissed it, said sadly:

"Ach! poor little lamb, I fear you will have no more luck than the rest. How should you with such a father?" she added in German.

As for Dick Learmer, with the exception of the birth of this to him inopportune child, which now stood between him and the Devene wealth, his fortunes seemed to wax as those of his rival, Rupert, waned and vanished. He was a clever man, with an agreeable manner and a certain gift of shallow but rather amusing speech; the kind of speech that entertains and even impresses for the moment, but behind which there is neither thought nor power. These graces soon made him acceptable to that dreary and middle-class institution, the House of Commons, where entertainment of any sort is so rare and precious a thing. Thus it happened that before long he came to be considered as a rising man, one with a future.

Moreover, on one or two occasions when he addressed the House upon some fiscal matter, he was fortunate enough to impress the public with the idea that he possessed a business ability that in fact was no part of his mental equipment, which impression was strengthened by a rather clever article, mostly extracted from works of reference, however, that he published in one of the leading reviews. The result was that soon Dick found himself a director of several sound and one or two speculative, but for the while prosperous, companies, which, in the aggregate,

to say nothing of the salary that he received from Lord Devene, who also paid for his qualifying shares, furnished him with a clear income of over £1,300 a year.

Thus was the scapegrace and debt-haunted Dick Learmer completely white-washed and rehabilitated in the eyes of all who knew of his existence, and thus did he come to be regarded as a political possibility, and therefore worthy of the attention of party wire-pullers and of the outside world at large.

CHAPTER XVII

WELCOME HOME!

DICK LEARMER, dressed in an irreproachable frock-coat which fitted his elegant figure very well, and with a fine black pearl in his necktie, an advertisement of his grief for the decease of his cousin Rupert, was lunching *tête-à-tête* with his cousin's widow on that same Sunday and at the very same hour that Rupert was indulging in the melancholy cogitations which have been recorded while he munched some biscuits washed down with a bottle of stout in his dirty cabin on board the tramp steamer. The Brook Street landlady was a good cook, and Edith's Chablis, not to mention a glass of port, a cup of coffee, and a liqueur brandy that followed, were respectively excellent. The warm fire in the pretty little sitting-room and the cigarettes he smoked over it, also proved acceptable upon this particularly cold and dreary Sabbath afternoon. Lastly, the lovely Edith, dressed in very attractive and artistic mourning, was a pleasant object to the eye as she sat opposite to him upon a low chair screening her face from the fire with a feather fan from the mantel-piece.

Dick, as we know, had always admired her earnestly, and now, whether the luncheon and the port, or the charming black dress set off with its white collar and cuffs, or the beautiful blue eyes and golden hair above were responsible for the result, he admired her more than ever. There was a pause in their conversation, during which she contemplated him reflectively.

"You are getting to look dreadfully middle-aged and

respectable, Dick," she remarked presently. "It's almost oppressive to those who knew you in your youth."

"I am middle-aged, and certainly I am respectable, Edith. Who wouldn't be that had sat yesterday upon the Board of a Life Insurance Society with five directors, none of whom were under seventy? What interest they can take in life and its affairs, I am sure I don't know."

"Probably they are only interested in other people's lives, or other people are interested in theirs," answered Edith carelessly.

"By the way," said Dick, "there was a question before us yesterday about poor Rupert's insurance."

Edith winced a little at the name, but only looked up in query.

"You know," he went on, "it was a pretty heavy one, and he only paid a single premium, a very bad job for the office. Well, you haven't claimed that £10,000, and the question was whether you should be communicated with on the matter. They settled to leave it alone, and that old death's-head of a chairman remarked with a grin that he had never known money which was due to remain unasked for. Why don't you ask? £10,000 is always handy," he added, looking at her keenly.

"I don't know," she answered. "Everybody assumes it, but I can't see any proof that Rupert is really dead."

"Nonsense," he replied, almost angrily, "he is as dead as Julius Cæsar. He must be; that Egyptian sergeant, what's his name, said that he saw them all shot down, and then himself escaped."

"It's rather odd, Dick, that this sergeant should have escaped under the circumstances. Why wasn't he shot down too? His luck must have been remarkably good, or his legs remarkably swift."

"Can't say; but fellows do have luck at times. I've met with some myself lately. Also, men don't live for months in a waterless desert."

"He might have been rescued, by these women for instance. The man Abdullah didn't say so, but someone else did say that the sheik Abraham, or whatever his name was, and his people were killed, for they were seen hanging upon trees. Now who hanged them there? Rupert and his people could not have done so if they themselves were already dead. Besides, it was not in his line."

"Can't say," answered Dick again; "but I am sure he is gone. Ain't you?"

"No, not sure, Dick, though I think he must be. And yet sometimes I feel as if he were near me—I feel it now, and the sensation isn't altogether pleasant."

"Bosh!" said Dick.

"Yes, I think it's bosh too, so let us talk of something else."

Dick threw the end of his cigarette into the fire, and watched it thoughtfully while it burnt away.

"You think that's half a cigarette, don't you, Edith?" he said, pointing to it.

"It doesn't look much like anything else," she answered; "but of course changing into smoke and ashes."

"It is something else, though, Edith. I'll tell you what, it is my rather spotted past that is burning up there, turning into clean white ash and wholesome-smelling smoke, like an offering on an altar."

"Heavens! Dick, you are growing poetical. What can be the matter with you?"

"Disease of the heart, I think. Edith, do you want to remain a widow always?"

"How can I tell?" she answered uneasily. "I haven't been one long—yet."

"No, but life is short and one must look forward; also, the circumstances are unusual. Edith dear, I want you to say that after the usual decent interval you will marry—me. No, don't answer yet, let me have my innings first, even if you bowl

me out afterwards. Edith, you know that I have always been in love with you from a boy. All the queer things I did, or most of them, were really because of you. You drove me wild, drawing me on and pushing me off, and I went croppers to make myself forget. You remember our quarrel this day year. I behaved badly, and I am very sorry; but the fact is I was quite mad with jealousy. I don't mind owning it now the poor fellow is gone. Well, since I knew that, I have been doing my very best to mend. I have worked like a horse down in that beastly House, which I hate, and learned up all sorts of things that I don't want to know anything about. Also, I have got these directorships, thanks to Devene, whose money was supposed to be behind me, and they are practically for life. So I have about £1,500 a year to begin with, and you will have nearly as much. That isn't exactly riches, but put together, it is enough for a start."

"No," said Edith, "it isn't riches, but two people might manage on it if they were economical."

"Well," he went on quietly, "the question is whether you will consent to try in due course?" and he bent forward and looked at her with his fine black eyes.

"I don't know," she answered doubtfully. "Dick, I am sorry, but I can't quite trust you, and if marriage is to be successful, it must be built on other things than love and raptures; that is why I accepted poor Rupert."

"Why don't you trust me?" he asked.

"Dick, is it true that you arranged this mission of Rupert's in the hope that what has happened — might happen?"

"Most certainly not!" he answered boldly. "I had nothing to do with his mission, and never dreamed of such a thing. Who suggested that to you—Lord Southwick?"

She shook her head.

"I never spoke to him on the matter; indeed, I haven't met him since the wedding, but it was suggested."

"Devene, then, I suppose. It is just like one of his dirty tricks."

But Edith only answered: "Then it is *not* true?"

"I have told you; it is a damnable lie!"

"I am glad to hear it, Dick, for otherwise I could never have forgiven you. To be quite honest, I don't think I behaved well to Rupert in letting him go out there alone, and if I were sure that it was through you that all this was brought about for your own ends—and jealous men have done such things since David, you know—why then—"

"Then what?"

"Then, Dick, we shouldn't talk any more about the matter. Indeed, I am not certain that we should talk at all, for at least he was an honest man who loved me, and his blood would be on your hands, and through yours on mine."

"If that's all, they are clean enough," replied Dick, with a laugh which some people might have considered rather forced; "almost as clean as your own, Edith," and stretching forward, he laid his hand by hers upon her dress.

She looked at it, but did not move either her dress or her hand.

"It seems clean enough, Dick," she said, "except where those old cigarettes have stained your thumb and fingers. Now, I never smoked, and mine are *quite* white."

He took the hand—uplifted now—and under pretence of examining it, drew her fingers to his lips and kissed them. Edith did not protest; it seemed that she was in a mood to be made love to by Dick, who, consequently, like a good and experienced general, proceeded to press his advantage. Dropping on his knees before her—an easy movement, for his chair was close, and, like her own, not high—he encircled her with his arm, drew down her golden head and kissed her passionately.

"Dick," she said, "you shouldn't do that;" but she did not

resist, nor was there anger in her voice as on a certain previous occasion.

"Very well," he whispered; "kiss me once and I will stop."

She drew her head back, and looked at him with her wonderful blue eyes that seemed to have grown strangely soft.

"If I kissed you, Dick, you know it would mean more than your kissing me," she murmured.

"Yes, Edith; it would mean what I want it to mean—that you love me and will marry me. So, dearest, kiss me and let us make an end after all these years."

For a little while she continued to look at him, then she sighed, her breast heaved, and her eyes grew softer and more tender still.

"I suppose it must be so," she said, "for I never felt towards any man as I do to you," and bending her head, she kissed him and gently thrust him from her. Dick sank back into his chair and mechanically lit another cigarette. "You soon go back to your old habits, Dick," she said, watching him. "No, don't throw it away, for while you smoke you will keep still, and I have something to say. There must be no word of this to anyone, Dick—not for another six months, at least. Do you understand?" He nodded. "It has come about a great deal too soon," she went on; "but you asked yourself to lunch—not I—and I felt lonely and tired of my own thoughts. Mrs. Ullershaw's funeral upset me. I hated it, but I had to go. Dick, I am not happy as I ought to be. I feel as if something were coming between us; no, it has always been there, only now it is thicker and higher. Rupert used to talk a great deal about the difference between flesh and spirit, and at the time it bored me, for I didn't understand him. But I think that I do now. I—the outward I—well, after what has passed—you know, Dick, it's yours, isn't it? But the inner I—that which you can't admire or embrace,

remains as far from you as ever, and I'm not sure that it might not learn to hate you yet."

"It's rather difficult to separate them, Edith?" he answered unconcernedly, for these subtleties did not greatly alarm him who remembered that he had heard something like them before. "At any rate," he added, "I am quite content with your outward self," and he looked at her beauty admiringly, "and must live in hope that the invisible rest of you will decide to follow its lead."

"You are making fun of me," she said wearily. "But I daresay you are right for all that; I hope so. And now go away, Dick. I am not accustomed to these emotions, and they upset me. Yes, you can come back in a day or two—on Tuesday. No, no more affection, you are smoking—good-bye!"

So Dick went triumphant, his luck was good indeed, and he was really happy, for he adored Edith. She was the only thing or creature that he did adore—except himself.

. . . . . .

Once Rupert's steamer had come safe to dock, which happened a little after two o'clock, it took him but a short while to bid her farewell. Nor was the examination of his luggage a lengthy process, consisting as this did of nothing but a rough carpet-bag, in which were stuffed his Arab garments and a few necessaries that, like the clothes he wore, he had purchased from or through sailors on the ship. The officials, who could not quite place him, for his appearance puzzled them, thought well to turn out the bag whereof the contents puzzled them still more, but as there was nothing dutiable in it they were soon thrust back again. Then with some difficulty he found a hansom cab, and crawling into it, bade the man drive to his mother's house in Regent's Park, a journey that seemed longer to Rupert than all those days upon the sea.

At length they were there, and having paid the cabman, he took his carpet-bag and turned to enter the little iron gate. He could not see the house as yet, for the dusk was gathering and the fog obscured it. Still it struck him as strangely silent and unfriendly. There was no light in the drawing-room window as there should have been, for he remembered that even when the curtains were drawn, they did not fit close, as he had often noticed when returning home at night.

Some premonition of evil struck Rupert's heart, but he repelled it, and hobbling up the little walk and the steps beyond, found the bell and rang. There was a long pause, until at last he heard somebody shuffling down the passage, heard, too, the door being unlocked and the chain unhooked. Then he grew terribly afraid until he remembered of a sudden that it was quite possible that Edith and his mother were again spending the New Year at Devene. Well, it would be a great disappointment, but on the other hand, he would have a few hours to make himself more presentable.

The door opened, and before him stood a stout, heavy-faced woman who held a greasy tin candlestick in her hand.

"What do you want?" she said, surveying this rough figure and his crutch and carpet-bag doubtfully, for her mind ran on tramps.

"I want to see Mrs. Ullershaw," he answered, and his voice reassured her somewhat.

"Mrs. Ullershaw? Which Mrs. Ullershaw?—for I've heard there was a young 'un as well as an old 'un. I ain't the regular caretaker, you know, only a friend what's took her place while she spends New Year's Day in the country with her husband's people."

"Yes, quite so," said Rupert. "I meant the old Mrs. Ullershaw—"

"Well, then, you had better go and call on her in Brompton Cemetery, for I'm told she was buried there last week. My gracious! what's the matter with the man?" she added, for

Rupert had dropped his carpet-bag and fallen back against the doorway.

"Nothing," he said faintly. "If I might have a glass of water?"

She shook her fat head wisely.

"No, you don't go to play that glass-of-water trick upon me. I know; I goes to fetch it, and you prigs the things for which I am responsible. But you can come into this room and sit down if you like, if you feel queer, for I ain't afraid of no one-legged man;" and she opened the door of the dining-room.

Rupert followed her into it and sank into his own chair, for the place was still furnished. Indeed, there in the frame of the looking-glass some of his invitation-cards remained, and on the sideboard stood the bronze Osiris which he had given to Edith. In the turmoil of his dazed mind, it brought back to him a memory of the crypt of the temple at Tama and the great statue of that same god, which presided there over the place of death. Well, it seemed that this also was a place of death.

"When did Mrs. Ullershaw die?" he asked, with an effort.

"About five days before she was buried. That's the usual time, ain't it?"

He paused, then asked again: "Do you know where the young Mrs. Ullershaw is?"

"No, I don't; but my friend said that's her address on the bit of paper on the mantel-piece in case any letters came to forward."

Rupert raised himself and took the paper. It was an envelope; that, indeed, in which his last letter to Edith had been posted from Abu-Simbel, and beneath her name, Mrs. Rupert Ullershaw, the Regent's Park address was scratched out, and that of the Brook Street rooms written instead, in his wife's own handwriting.

"Thank you," he said, retaining the paper; "that is all I wanted to know. I will go now."

Next instant he was on the steps and heard the door being locked behind him.

His cab was still standing a few yards off, as the man wished to breathe his horse after the long drive. Rupert re-entered it, and told him to go to Brook Street. There, in the cab, the first shock passed away, and his natural grief overcame him, causing the tears to course down his cheeks. It was all so dreadful and so sad—if only his mother had lived a little longer!

Very soon they reached the number written on the old envelope, and once more Rupert, carpet-bag in hand, rang the bell, or rather pushed the button, for this one was electric, wondering in a vague way what awaited him behind *that* door. It was answered by a little underling, a child fresh from the country, for the head servant had gone for a Sunday jaunt in the company of Edith's own maid.

"Is Mrs. Ullershaw in?" asked Rupert.

"Yes, sir, I believe so," she answered, curtseying to this great, dim apparition, and striving to hide her dirty little hands under her apron.

Rupert entered the hall, and asked which was her room.

"Upstairs, sir, and the first door to the right;" for remembering the scolding she had recently received from Edith when she showed up Sir Somebody Something with her sleeves tucked above her thin elbows, as they were just now, the girl did not wish to repeat that unforgiveable offence. So having explained and shut the door, she promptly vanished.

Still carrying his carpet-bag, Rupert climbed the stairs till he came to the room indicated. Placing his bag upon a butler's tray outside, which had not been removed since luncheon, he knocked.

"Come in," said a voice—the voice of Edith, who thought that it was a maid with some hot water which she had forgotten when she brought up the tea.

He turned the handle and entered. Edith was standing on the other side of the room near the fire with her back towards him, for she was engaged in pouring herself out a cup of tea. Presently, hearing the *clump clump*, of his wooden crutch upon the floor—for he advanced towards her before speaking—she turned round wondering what could be causing that unusual noise. By the light of a standard lamp, she perceived a tall figure clad in a sailor's pea jacket and mustard-coloured trousers, who seemed to be leaning on a great rough stick, and to have a gigantic red beard and long, unkempt hair which tumbled all over his forehead.

"Who on earth are you?" she exclaimed, "and what are you doing here?"

"Edith," he answered, in a reproachful tone, "Edith!"

She snatched a candle from the tea-tray, and running rather than walking to him, held it towards his face and looked. Next moment it was rolling on the floor, while she staggered back towards the fire.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped. "Oh, my God! is it you, or your ghost?"

"It is I—Rupert," he replied heavily, "no ghost. I almost wish I were."

She collected herself; she stood upright.

"You have been dead for months; at least, they said that you were dead. Welcome home, Rupert!" and with a kind of despairing gesture she stretched out her hand.

Again he hobbled forward, again the rough-hewn thornwood crutch, made by himself with a pocket-knife, clumped upon the carpeted floor. Edith looked down at the sound, and saw that one leg of the mustard-coloured trousers swung loose. Then she looked up and perceived for certain what at first she had only half grasped, that where the left eye should have been was only a sunken hollow, scarlet-rimmed and inflamed with scars as of burning beneath it, and that the right eye also was

inflamed and bloodshot as though with weeping, as indeed was the case.

"What has happened to you?" she asked, in a whisper, for she could find no voice to speak aloud, and the hand that she had outstretched dropped to her side. "Oh, your foot and eye—what has happened to them?"

"Torture," he answered, in a kind of groan. "I fell into the hands of savages who mutilated me. I am sorry. I see it shocks you," and he stood still, leaning heavily on the crutch, his whole attitude one of despair with which hope still struggled faintly.

If it existed, it was destined to swift doom.

Edith made no movement, only said, pointing to a chair by him, the same in which Dick had smoked his cigarettes:

"Won't you sit down?"

He fell on to, rather than sat in the chair, his heavy crutch clattering to the floor beside him.

"Will you have some tea?" she went on distractedly. "Oh, there is no other cup, take mine."

"Thank you," he answered, waving his hand in refusal. "I am drinking from a cup of my own, and I find it bitter."

For a few seconds there was silence between them, which she broke, for she felt that it was driving her mad.

"Tell me," she said—"tell me—dear—" the word stuck in her throat and came out with a kind of gasp, "what does all this mean? You see I am quite ignorant. I thought you dead; look at my dress."

"Only what I have told you. I am an unfortunate man. I was set upon by an overwhelming force. I fought as best I could, until nearly all my people were killed, but unluckily I was stunned and taken prisoner. Afterwards they offered me the choice of Islam or death. I chose death; but they tortured me first, hacking off my foot and putting out my eye with hot irons, and in the end, when they were about to hang me, I was rescued."

"Islam?" she broke in, shivering. "What is Islam?"

"In other words, the Mahommedan religion, which they wished me to accept."

"And you let them do—those dreadful things to you rather than pretend to be a Mahommedan for a few days?"

"Of course," he answered, with a kind of sullen pride. "What did you expect of me, Edith?"

"I? Oh, I don't know; but it seems so terrible. Well, and who rescued you?"

"Some women in authority whom I had befriended. They came at the head of their tribesmen and killed the Arabs, and took me to their home and nursed me back to life."

She looked up quickly.

"We heard about them," she said; "one was young and beautiful; if a savage can be beautiful, was she not?"

"Yes," he answered indifferently, "I suppose that Mea was beautiful, but she is not a savage, she is of much more ancient race and higher rank than ours—the lady Tama. I will tell you all about her some time."

"Ah!" exclaimed Edith, "but I don't know that she interests me."

"She ought to," he replied, "as she saved my life."

Then that subject dropped.

"Do you know," she asked, "oh! do you know about your mother?"

"Yes, Edith, I drove to the house when I landed from the ship and heard. It was there I got your address, and thrusting his hand into the side-pocket of the pea-coat, he produced the crumpled envelope. "I suppose that you were with her?" he added.

"No, not at the last."

"Who was, then?"

"No one except the nurse, I think. She had another stroke and became insensible, you know. I had left a fortnight before, as I could do no good and they wanted my room."

Now for the first time resentment began to rise in Rupert's patient heart, stirred up there by the knowledge that his beloved mother had been left to die in utter loneliness.

"Indeed," he said, and there was a stern ring in his voice. "It might have been kinder had you stayed, which, as my wife, it was your place to do."

"I thought that I was no longer your wife, Rupert, only your widow. Also, it's not my fault, but I cannot bear sickness and all those horrors, I never could," and she looked at his mutilated form and shuddered.

"Pray then that it may not be your lot to suffer them some day," he said, in the same stern voice.

It frightened her, and she plunged into a new subject, asking:

"Have you heard that things have gone very badly for you? First, Lord Devene has an heir, a strong and healthy boy, so you will not succeed."

"I am heartily glad to hear it," he said, "may the child live and prosper."

She stared at this amazing man, but finding nothing to say upon the point that would sound decent, went on:

"Then you are almost disgraced, or rather your memory is. They say that you caused your mission to fail by mixing yourself up with women."

"I read it in the papers," he replied, "and it will not be necessary for me to assure you that it is a falsehood. I admit, however, that I made a mistake in giving escort to those two women, partly because they were in difficulties and implored my help, and partly because there are generally some women in such a caravan as mine pretended to be, and I believed that their presence would make it look more like the true thing. Also, I am of opinion that the sheik Ibrahim, who had an old grudge against me, would have attacked me whether the women were there or not. However this may be, my hands are clean" (it was the second time this day that Edith had heard those words, and she shivered at them), "I have done my duty

like an honest man as best I could, and if I am called upon to suffer in body or in mind," and he glanced at his empty trouser-leg, "as I am, well, it is God's will, and I must bear it."

"How *can* you bear it?" she asked, almost fiercely. "To be mutilated; to be made horrible to look at; to have your character as an officer ruined; to know that your career is utterly at an end; to be beggared, and to see your prospects destroyed by the birth of this brat—oh, how can you bear all these things? They drive me mad."

"We have still each other," he answered sadly.

She turned on him with a desperate gesture. She had never loved him, had always shrunk from him; and now—the kiss of another man still tingling upon her lips—oh! she loathed him—this one-eyed, hideous creature who had nothing left to give her but a tarnished name. She could never be his wife, it would kill her—and then the shame of it all, the triumph of the women who had been jealous of her beauty and her luck in marrying the distinguished heir of Lord Devene. She could not face it, and she must make that clear at once.

"No, no," she gasped. "It sounds hard, but I *must* tell you. I can't, I can't—be your wife."

He quivered a little, then sat still as stone.

"Why not, Edith?" he asked, in a cold, unnatural voice.

"Oh! look in the glass and you will see—that horrible red hole, and the other all red also."

"I was totally blind for a while, and I'm ashamed to say it, but grief for my mother has brought back inflammation. It may pass. Perhaps they can do something for my looks."

"But they cannot give you back your foot, and I hate a cripple. You know I always did. Also, the thing is impossible now; we should be beggars."

"What, then, do you wish me to do?" he asked.

"Rupert," she replied, in an intense whisper, flinging herself upon her knees before him, and looking up at him

with wild, appealing eyes—"Rupert, be merciful, you are dead, remain dead, and let me be."

"Tell me one thing, Edith," he said. "Did you ever love me?"

"No, I suppose not quite."

"Then why did you marry me? For my position and prospects?"

"Yes, to some extent; also, I respected and admired you, and Lord Devene forced me to it, I don't know why."

Again that slight shiver went through Rupert's frame, and he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Evidently she did not know the facts, and why should he tell her of her own disgrace; he who had no wish for vengeance?

"Thank you for being so plain with me," he said heavily. "I am glad that you have told me the truth, as I wish you well, and it may save you some future misery, that of being the wife of a man whom you find hideous and whom you never loved. Only, for your own sake, Edith, think a minute; it is your last chance. Things change in this world, don't they? I have found that out. Well, they might change again, and then you might be sorry. Also, your position as the wife of a man who is only supposed to be dead will, in fact, be a false one, since at some future time he might be found to be alive."

"I have thought," she answered. "I must take the risks. You will not betray me, Rupert."

"No," he answered, in tones of awful and withering contempt. "I shall not follow your example, I shall not betray you. Take what little is mine, by inheritance or otherwise; it will prove to the world that I am really dead. But henceforth, Edith, I hate you, not with a hate that desires revenge, for I remember that we are still man and wife, and I will never lift a finger to harm you any more than I will break the bond that is and must remain until the death of one of us. Still, I tell you that all my nature and my spirit rise up against you. Did you

swear to me that you loved me as much as once you said you did, I would not touch your beauty with my finger-tips, and never will I willingly speak to you again in this world or the next. Go your own way, Edith, as I go mine," and heaving himself out of the low chair, Rupert lifted his crutch from the ground, and leaning on it heavily, limped from the room.

As he fumbled at the door-handle, Edith rose from her knees, where she had remained all this time, and running after him, cried:

"Rupert!"

He took no heed, the veil of separation had fallen between them, a wall of silence had been built; she might as well have spoken to the air.

She saw him lift the carpet-bag from the butler's tray, then down the stairs went that single, heavy footfall, and the clumping of the crutch. The front door opened and closed again. It was done.

. . . . . .

For a while Edith remained almost fainting, then she roused herself, thought a little, and rang the bell. It was answered by the parlour-maid, who had returned.

"Jane," she said, "when you are out in future, will you be so good as to tell that girl Eliza never to show a stranger up here again without asking if I wish to see him? This afternoon she let in some kind of a madman, who brought a bag of smuggled silks which he wished to sell me. I could not get rid of him for nearly half an hour, and he has frightened me almost out of my wits. No; I don't want to hear any more about it. Take away the things."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAPPY, HAPPY LIFE

WHEN Rupert left the house in Brook Street, he walked on aimlessly down it, down Bond Street, across Piccadilly, where in the mist he was nearly knocked over by a cab, down St. James' Street to Pall Mall, and along it till he came to the Army and Navy Club, of which he was a member. Here he paused in front of the portico whither he had unconsciously directed his steps, then remembering that he was dead and that it would never do for him to enter there, turned round hurriedly and butted into a portly general under whom he had served, who was about to go up the steps of the club. The general, a choleric person, cursed him, then concluding from his crutch and wretched appearance that he was a poor, homeless cripple, felt ashamed of himself, and with some words of regret, thrust sixpence into his hand.

"Pray don't apologise, General," said Rupert, "it was my awkwardness." Then he looked at the sixpence, and adding: "With your permission I will pass it on," he gave it to a hungry-looking crossing-sweeper who waited hard by, and limped forward.

The general stood amazed, for he knew the voice, but could not put a name to it.

"Hi!" he shouted, after the retreating figure, but Rupert realising his danger, went on quickly towards the Athenæum and was soon lost in the mist.

"Devilish odd thing," said the General, as he strolled up the steps. "Whose voice was it? I know—Rupert Ullershaw's!"

Then he ran to the porter's box and asked: "Has Colonel Ullershaw been in the club?"

"No, General," answered the porter, "he isn't a member now; he's dead. Killed in the Soudan, General, some months ago."

"Oh, yes," said the General, "I remember. He's the fellow who made a mess of things. Good man too, but there was a woman in it. Well, hang me, if I haven't seen his ghost without a leg and with a beard a yard long. Can't mistake that voice. Heard it right across the square at Abu-Klea. Most astonishing thing."

For years afterwards this meeting with the mutilated shade of Rupert Ullershaw was the general's favourite ghost story, especially in future days when certain facts came to be common knowledge.

Rupert passed the Athenæum. With some trouble, for they were slippery, he negotiated the steps beyond the Duke of York's column, then hurried on past the Horse Guards and the Foreign Office, till at length he reached the Embankment, and being very tired, sat down on a seat by the river. Before long a policeman came and disturbed him, asking what he was doing loitering there. He replied humbly enough that he believed it was a public place, whereon the policeman stared at him as the general had done, and went by. Still he rose and walked forward till he came to where the shadows were deep between two lamps, for here the thickening fog gave him privacy, and placing his bag by him, leaned upon the parapet and listened to the murmur of the river beneath.

Then and there it was, now when the exertions of walking were done with, that the whole weight of his miseries struck Rupert full. His soul descended into hell; he saw and understood the awful truth. Wrecked bodily, ruined in reputation, deserted by the world, scorned as loathsome by Edith, Devene's daughter, who had only married him for what he had to give, there was no outcast in all that cruel

London more lonesome, more hopeless than he, who, not ten months before, had been one of its fêted and sought-after favourites. It was that day twelvemonth, New Year's Eve, he remembered, that he had proposed to and been accepted by Edith, remembered also the words spoken to him then by Lady Devene and his mother, of which now he felt the full meaning, although he had paid little attention to them at the time. Those women understood; his love had blinded him.

What was there left for him to do—who had promised to "remain dead"? The lapping of the water beneath seemed to shape an answer. It spoke to him as the thud of the steamer and the beat of the train had spoken once before, and well he understood its meaning. All his hopes lay buried beneath that water of death, and there also were his mother and many a good friend and comrade. Why should he not seek them? Edith would be pleased, for then he would remain dead indeed. Yet it was a wicked act. Well, sometimes circumstances outweighed scruples, and in that matter he felt as though he must take his chance—like Edith. If there were any worse place than this world in which, after all, with one exception, he had done his best, it must be bad indeed. Here was a deep that could have no depth below it, and therein he sojourned.

It would be easy. The wide handles of that accursed and weighty bag would pass over his head, a very fitting brick to drown a dog that had had its day. He was quite alone in the dreary place, where no one lingered on such a night. Why should they, when Salvation Army shelters were available? He could not go there, he could not go anywhere, he would be found out or recognised. The Thames mud was the best bed for him who felt so very tired.

Rupert leaned further over the parapet, nerving himself to the desperate deed, he who was almost mad with shame and sorrow. Then it was in the grey mist that lay upon the water, quite hiding it from his sight, that he seemed to see something

form which gradually took the shape of a woman's face, surrounded by cloudy, outspread hair. He could see it clearly, and in it the tender, pitying eyes from which tears ran, so clearly that at once he knew it for the face of Mea, as after all those weeks of darkness it had first appeared to his returning sight. Yes, as it had arisen then upon the blindness of his body with its assurance of light renewed, so did it arise again upon the utter blackness of his soul's despair, a beacon of hope in the midst of that desperate shipwreck, a token of love unchanging and unchanged above this seething bitterness of scorn and hate.

Of a sudden, as the shadow passed, he remembered the promise which he had made to Mea when she warned him that sometimes things went amiss. He had thought it idle enough even then who only gave it to please her, and since that day it had rarely crossed his mind. Now he knew, however, that her true affection for him had endowed her with some strange foresight of the woes about to fall upon his defenceless head, and thereby, in a way unforeseen by herself or him, had provided him with a door of escape from the dreadful habitations into which his spirit was to be driven by Destiny. Mea would welcome back her friend who had no other friend in all the world; moreover, in such an event as this he had sworn that he would return to her.

Then, should he sink in that river, he would be a liar as well as a coward. No, the river was done with. Mea had saved him from this sin, at the very thought of which he felt even now that he would live to shiver and be ashamed.

New life came back to Rupert, hope was born again, and its first manifestation was of a very material nature. He felt hungry who had eaten little that day and undergone much. Taking up the bag, which but a few minutes before he had intended to put to such a dreadful purpose, he lifted his crutch and made his way briskly across the Embankment, and along one of the side streets into the Strand. Here he found

a modest-looking eating-house, and entering, ordered himself some food, for which the waiter, noting his appearance, demanded payment in advance. While he ate he bethought himself, and as a result, took up a paper that lay near by and began to search the advertisements. Soon he discovered what he wanted. On the following morning, Monday, a steamer of one of the smaller and less known lines was advertised to sail for Egypt and other places, leaving Liverpool at eleven o'clock a.m. Rupert asked for an A.B.C. Railway Guide, and found that there was a train from Euston about 10.30, which reached Liverpool in the early morning.

This train in due course he took, and on the next day, as soon as the Liverpool office was open, booked a second-class passage to Egypt under an assumed name.

. . . . . .

It was spring in the oasis of Tama, where the crops were growing fast.

"Bakhita," said Mea suddenly one afternoon, "I grow weary of this place. To-morrow morning I ride down the Black Pass to look out at the desert beyond, which now should be beautiful with flowers, for heavy rains have fallen."

"It is not flowers that you would look for in the desert, if indeed any can be found there," answered Bakhita, with her peculiar smile, and shaking her white head. "Nor shall you enter on to that desert where the Khalifa's man-stealing savages roam in bands, yelling on Allah and killing peaceable folk. Still, if you wish it—or if you have dreamed a dream—you can ride down to the mouth of the pass with a suitable escort of spearsmen, and stare at the desert till you are tired."

"Bakhita, my aunt," asked Mea angrily, "who is mistress in this land—you or I?"

"Tama, my niece," answered Bakhita calmly, "where you are concerned, I am mistress. You set no foot in that desert.

If you try to do so, I will order your own council of emirs to shut you up. He can come to seek you if he wishes, you shall not go to seek him."

"Bakhita, I spoke to you of flowers."

"Yes, Mea, you did; but the flower you mean has a red beard; also, an Arab has trodden on it and crushed it out of shape. Moreover, it grows in another land, and if it did not, what use would it be to your garden?"

"I am tired of this place and wish to look at the desert," answered Mea. "If you trouble me much more, I will cross it and travel to Egypt. Even that school at Luxor is not so dull as Tama. Go; do my bidding."

Then Bakhita went, full of her own thoughts, and ordered the emirs to furnish an escort of a hundred spears as a devil had entered into their lady, and she knew not where it would lead her. The emirs grumbled because the crops required attention, and asked if the devil could not be sent away for a little while, but Bakhita answered them in such fashion that before the sun was well up on the following morning the hundred horsemen were in attendance.

So they rode to the mouth of the Black Pass and camped there. The whole of the next day Mea stared at the desert, in which, after all, there proved to be few flowers. The captains of the escort, who were thinking of the weeding of their crops, asked if they were to return on the following morning. She answered no, the desert air was improving her health. Next night they repeated their question. She answered no, her health was being completely re-established by the desert air; but if they wished, they could go home and leave her. This, however, they declined to do, saying that if the crops suffered, it was bad, but if anything happened to their lady, then they were disgraced men, and even their women-folk would refuse them.

Another evening came on, and in the light of the setting sun appeared far away one solitary man riding a very tired

camel. In that vast plain from the horizon of which he emerged, he looked an extraordinarily lonesome object.

"What is that man?" asked Mea of Bakhita in a strange voice.

"A Bedouin thief, I suppose, a spy of the Khalifa's. How should I know what he is? Bid your people go to find out."

"No," answered Mea; "we will wait and see what the thief does. Let the men keep hidden and be prepared to attack him."

The thief or the spy continued to approach, till presently his camel seemed to go dead-lame, and he was obliged to halt in a little clump of bush about half a mile from the mouth of the pass.

"There is no moon, so he will have to sit there till morning," said Bakhita. "Well, it will be easier to capture him in the dark."

The night fell swiftly.

"Now," said Mea, "bring five men and let us go to take this spy. Anubis, come hither, little dog, we are going to take a spy and a lame camel, but, Anubis, do not bark, or you will betray us to his fury."

So they went out through the gloom, and when they drew near the clump of bush, dismounted and advanced on foot, Mea leading the dog Anubis by a string. One of the men, who walked a little ahead, came back and reported that the spy had lit a fire and hung a kettle over it to boil; also that he was seated with his back to the fire and by its light engaged in reading a book, which he thought a strange thing for a spy to do.

Mea listened and said nothing. They were travelling up wind towards the stranger, and now the dog Anubis began to sniff the air and grow excited. Whether by design or by accident, Mea let one end of the fibre string by which she held it slip, and away it bolted into the bush, whence presently

arose a sound of joyous yelpings, mingled with the deep tones of a man's voice.

"That dog is not angry," said Bakhita.

Mea looked at her, a wonderful look. Then she, too, ran forward into the bush more quickly even than the dog had run. Waving back the escort, for now she was sure of the truth, Bakhita followed, and presently this was what she saw. The man in Arab dress, with a book beside him, was seated on the ground, while behind grazed the lame camel. In the man's arms, still yelping and licking every part of him that it could reach, was the cur-dog Anubis, whilst standing in the shadow, as yet unseen by the man, with that wonderful look still upon her face, was Mea. She advanced silently, like a dream or a ghost, till she stood between him and the fire. Feeling its heat cut off he ceased fondling the dog, and looked up and round trying to see who it was, for no light fell on her. Then Mea spoke in that rich and love-laden voice of hers which, to him at any rate, differed from the voice of any other woman—spoke in her pretty, broken English:

"Rupert Bey he know the nasty little dog Anubis which runs from his mistress to him, but the mistress Mea, ah! he know her not."

Next moment there was a great commotion. Poor Anubis rolled from Rupert's lap into the fire, where he burnt his tail, and then sat down with a yelp and licked it, his eyes still fixed on Rupert, who snatched his crutch and struggled from the ground. He was up, his arms were outstretched; then suddenly he seemed to remember, for he let them fall and with his right hand seized that of Mea and pressed it first to his forehead and then to his lips.

"What a fool," said Bakhita to herself in the background, "to kiss her fingers when he might have kissed her face. I always thought that these white people were mad, but this Bey is a saint as well. Poor Mea, who has fallen in love with a holy man. Give me a sinner, say I."

Meanwhile, Mea had returned the "holy man's" compliment by kissing *his* fingers, but to *herself* she said: "So the woman with the snow face and the sapphire eyes has only ill-treated him. It may be evil, but oh! I wish that she were dead, for then he would not only love me, he would say it also."

"You have come!" she exclaimed, in Arabic. "Oh, my lord! did I not tell you that we should meet again, and have I not felt you drawing near to me, and therefore taken these people from their gardens and sat here for three whole days?"

"Yes, Tama, I have come," he answered, in a somewhat shaky voice.

"Is that all you say?" she went on, and there were doubt and fear in her voice. "For how long have you come? Perhaps you do but sojourn for a night or for a week. Oh! tell me quickly—for how long have you come?"

"I don't know," he answered; "it depends on you. For all my life, I think, if you will keep me as your servant."

A great sigh of relief burst from Mea's breast.

"Oh! stop for this life and the next, too, if you will. Stop till the mountains melt into the desert and the Nile runs through Tama—that is, if I may stop with you. But what mean you? How can you be my servant—you who are—something else?" and she waved her hand upward.

"Mea," he said, "I must make you understand. I—I am a poor man now; I have nothing left in the world, or, at least, the little that I have I cannot get, because I have promised to be dead to the world, and if I asked for my money, why then, they would know that I am alive. Look! that is all that I possess," and putting his hand into his pocket, he produced seven and a half piastres—"that, a gun, and a lame camel. I have had to live hard to make my money last from London to Tama, and, as you see, even to risk the desert alone. Well, I must earn my bread, and I remembered your

kindness, and your promise that I should be welcome, so I thought to myself: 'I will go back to the lady Mea, and I will ask her to let me manage her lands, and in return to give me a house to live in and some food, and perhaps if I can make them pay better than they do, a little percentage of the profits to buy myself books and clothes.' I don't know if you think I am asking too much," he added humbly.

"No," answered Mea, "I do not think that you are asking too much, who might have had more; but we will strike hands upon our bargain afterwards. Meanwhile—my servant—I engage you for life, and as a luck-penny will you give me some of that dinner which you are cooking in the pot, for I am hungry? No," she added, "I forget; it is I should give the luck-penny, and Anubis, whom you love better, shall have your dinner."

Then she clapped her hands, and the five men advanced out of the darkness, looking curiously at Rupert. She turned upon them fiercely.

"Are you stones of the desert or palms of the wood," she cried, "that you stand so still? Down, dogs, and make obeisance to your lord, who has come back to rule you!"

They did not hesitate or wait to be told again, for something in Tama's eye informed them that prompt obedience was best. Nor, indeed, did they grudge him fealty, for Rupert was loved by all of them as the great man and the brave who had saved their lady's life or honour. Flat they went upon the sand, and in spite of his protests laid their hands upon his foot and did him homage in the Eastern style.

"It is enough," said Mea. "Back, one of you, to the camp, and bring my mare for my lord to ride, and bid the emir turn out his men to greet him."

A man went like an arrow, while the others retreated to see about the sick camel, and to lead it into camp.

"Mea, Mea," said Rupert reproachfully, "you are putting me

in a very false position. I am nothing but a broken wanderer, and out of seven piastres what gift can I give these men whom you force to do obeisance to me as though I were a sultan?"

"You can give them the best of gifts, the gift you have given me, that of your presence. Let us understand one another, Rupert Bey. You may call yourself my servant if you will, I do not quarrel with the word, for lack of a better. But with me you are my people's lord, since, but for you, I should not be here among them."

"How can it be?" he muttered, "since I may not ask—" and the look upon his face told her the rest.

Her hand shook a little. "She still lives?" she said, glancing at him.

He nodded.

"And you still hold yourself bound to her and her alone?"

"Yes, Mea, by my law and my oath, neither of which may be broken."

She drew nearer and looked up into his face. "Do you still love her, Rupert?"

"No," he said shortly. "She has behaved cruelly to me; she is quite dead to me."

"Ah! And do you love any other woman?"

The great head drooped forward. "Yes, Mea."

"So! Now what is her name?"

Rupert looked about him like a man who seeks escape from dangers and finds none. Then he answered:

"Her name is yours—yours and no other's. But oh! have pity on my weakness. Remember that this lonely path is hard; do not drive me back into the wilderness."

She let her head fall a little, and when she lifted it again he saw by the light of the fire and of the bright stars above, that her sweet face shone with a great and abiding joy.

"Have no fear, Rupert," she said. "Is my own path so easy that I should wish to plant thorns in yours? I am well content; I tell you that I am well content. This is the best

and happiest hour of my life; it shines bright above me as that star. I understand that you are great and noble, who being a man that loves, yet deny your heart. Shall I then not deny my heart also, or shall I seek to tarnish your honour in your own eyes? Nay, may I perish first, or—worse still—be parted from you. What was our compact? That we should be as brother and sister, having withal the love of a hundred husbands and the love of a hundred wives. It stands, and it shall stand, nor will I grow bitter or unkind. Only I fear me, Rupert, that as my beauty wanes, you who are tied to me but by the spirit, you who do not see me re-arise in children, may weary of this jealous, half-wild daughter of the desert—for jealous I know I still shall be."

Now it was his turn to say "Fear not, Mea, fear not; broken body and broken spirit have come home together, have come home to you like a swallow in the spring, and they will seek no other nest."

"In the name of God, so be it," she said.

"In the name of God, so it is," he answered.

This, then, was their marriage, there amidst the desert sands and beneath the desert stars, which they felt even then were less eternal than the troth they plighted; as it proved, the strangest and yet the happiest and most blessed marriage that ever was celebrated between man and woman—or so they came to think.

For are we not perchance befooled and blind? Driven by impulses that we did not create, but which are necessary to our creation, we follow after the flesh, and therefrom often garner bitterness, who, were our eyes opened, should pursue the spirit and win a more abiding joy which it alone can give. Yet perhaps it was not decreed that this should be so; perhaps in its day, for ends whereof we know nothing, the flesh was meant to be our master, to rule us, as the spirit shall rule in its appointed kingdom. Who can say?

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At least, this is certain; these two escaped to the borderland of that kingdom, though not without difficulty, backward looks, and struggling. There, before the time, they dwelt together in such content and satisfaction as are known to few, gazing forward, ever gazing forward, to the day when, as they believed, they should enter hand-in-hand upon an heritage glorious and eternal, and from the bitter seed of self-denial, planted in pain and watered with secret tears, should reap such a golden harvest and wreathe themselves with such white, immortal flowers as the rich soil of passion cannot bear, nor can the flesh hope to equal with its reward of fading, evil-odoured poppies.

For in that cruellest hour of his life, that hour of bereavement, of spittings and of scourgings, when he looked with longing at the grey waters of the river, and they showed him Mea's face, though he did not know it then, was born the pure happiness which Rupert had lived to reach. Never was Edith so kind to him as in that last act of utter faithlessness, for at her side all that was best in him must have withered, all that was weak and worldly must have increased. She took from him herself, but she gave him Mea. She deprived him of the world in which he was bred, with its false glitter and falser civilisation, its venomous strivings for victory bought with the heart's blood of those that fall, its mad lust for rank and wealth and precedence to be won by any means and kept as best they might, till, like broken toys, Time swept them and their holders to its dust-heap. But in place of these she gave him the wilderness and its beaconing stars; she gave him what all of us so sorely need, time to reflect upon the eternal verities of our being, time to repent his sins before he was called upon to give account of them. Yes, when Edith took from him the fever of the earth, she gave to him a foretaste of the peace that passeth understanding.

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Rupert was led to the camp in the mouth of the Black

Pass, and there received with waving of lances, with shoutings and with honour; very different greetings, he could not help reflecting, to those that had awaited him in his native city on the Thames, which is so mighty and multitudinous that kings may pass and leave it untroubled; the city where even the most distinguished human item hardly counts. That night he ate with Mea and Bakhita, and after the latter had gone to see about the setting of his tent, he told Mea all his story from the beginning, keeping nothing back, not even his first fault as a lad, for he felt that the confidence between them should be complete. She listened in silence, till he came to the tale of all he had suffered upon that awful Sunday in London, and of how his wife had rejected him, praying him to "remain dead." Then Mea's indignation broke out.

"I ought to give her thanks," she said; "yet here we should kill that woman. Say now, Rupert Bey, had this other man you tell of, your cousin, had he been with her?"

"How can I know?" answered Rupert. "But it is true that a glove such as he used to wear lay upon the table, and a man had been smoking in the room that day."

"I thought as much," she answered, "for otherwise she had spoken to you differently; although, of course, you were no longer rich and great, and with such women that changes the face of things."

"My wife would not disgrace herself," said Rupert proudly.

"Your wife had no husband then—you were a dead man," she answered.

"Yes; dead as I am now."

"Dead as you are—who live for me."

At this point Bakhita, who had been waiting outside for two hours in the cold, entered and remarked sarcastically that Rupert's tent was ready. He took the hint at once and retired. The old lady watched him go, then turned to Mea and said:

"Well, niece, what have you settled?"

Mea told her, whereon the grim Bakhita burst into a great laugh.

"Strange children you are indeed, both of you," she said. "Yet who shall say there is no wisdom in your childishness, who have learned that there are other things beyond this passing show? At the least, you seem happy in it—for the present."

"I am happy for the present, for the future, and forever," answered Mea.

"Then that is well, though it would seem that the old line must die with you, unless you change your mind and, after all, marry some other man."

"I marry no other man, Bakhita."

"So be it. Why should not the old line die? Everything has an end, like the gods of Egypt. If it were not so, new things could not begin. It does not matter so long as you are happy. But though you have found a new faith, laugh no more at my ancient magic, Mea. Did not the sinking boat sail back to your arms that night?"

"It sailed back, Bakhita, and when it sails forth again mine sails with it. I laugh at nothing. Old faiths and new, they are all shadows of the truth—for those who believe in them, Bakhita."

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Oh! happy, happy was the life that began for these two this night. Soon Rupert was installed in a little house not far from Mea's, and the wide, neglected lands were in his care. He worked early and late, and made them to blossom like the rose, so that wealth began to flow into the oasis of Tama. Then in the evenings when the work was done, he and Mea would eat together, and talk together, and read and study together, and together daily grow more changed and wise. But at an appointed hour they shook each other by the

hand and separated, and on the morrow that blessed, peaceful round began again.

He was her world, her life, the very altar of her faith, whence the pure incense of her heart went up in ceaseless sacrifice to Heaven. She was his love, his light, his star—all this yet unattained—as stars must be.

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER SEVEN YEARS

On the Tuesday after his Sunday luncheon with Edith, Dick called at the Brook Street rooms as arranged, this time for afternoon tea. He found Edith gloomy and upset, not at all in a mood indeed to respond to his demonstrations of affection. He asked her what was the matter, but could get no satisfactory answer out of her, and so at last went away in disgust, reflecting that of all women whom he had known, Edith was the most uncertain and bewildering.

Thus things went on for some time, interviews being alternated with letters sufficiently compromising in their allusions to what had passed between them, until, when actually forced into a corner, Edith informed him that her change of conduct was owing to a dream that she had dreamed in which she saw Rupert alive and well. Of course Dick laughed at her dream, but still she made it serve her turn for quite another three months. Then at length there came a day when he would be put off no longer.

The six months of silence for which she had stipulated were, he pointed out, more than gone by, and he proposed, therefore, to announce their engagement in the usual fashion.

"You must not," she said, springing up; "I forbid you. If you do so I will contradict it, and never speak to you again."

Now, exasperated beyond endurance, Dick's evil temper broke out. Even to Edith it was a revelation, for she had never seen him in such a rage before. He swore at her; he called

her names which she had not been accustomed to hear; he said that she was a bad woman who, having married Ullershaw for his rank and prospects, was now trying to break his—Dick's—heart for fun; that she had been the curse of his existence, and he hoped that it would all come back upon her own head, and so forth.

Edith, as a rule, was perfectly able to look after herself, but on this occasion the man's violence was too much for her who had never before been exposed to rough abuse. She grew frightened, and in her fear blurted out the truth.

"I can't marry you," she said, "and perhaps it is as well, as I don't wish to put up with this sort of thing."

"Curse it all! Why not?" he asked. "Are you ill, or are you going into a nunnery?"

She turned round upon him.

"No; for a better reason than either. Because a woman can't have two husbands. Rupert is alive."

Dick's rage vanished, his jaw fell and his face went white. "How do you know that?" he asked.

"Because I have seen him here. He came not much more than an hour after you had left that Sunday, on the 31st of December."

"You mean your dream," he said.

"No, I mean Rupert in flesh and blood, with his foot cut off and his eye burnt out."

"Then where is he now?" asked Dick, looking round as though he expected to see him emerge from behind the curtain.

"I don't know, I haven't an idea. He may be in England, or he may be in Egypt, or he may be at the bottom of the sea. We—don't correspond."

"I think you had better tell me all the truth if you can," said Dick grimly. "It will be best for both of us."

So she did, repeating their conversation almost word for word. Dick's imagination was vivid, and easily pictured the

scene there in the place of its enactment. He saw the wretched, crippled man dragging himself away upon his crutch out into the cold London night, away anywhere from the cruel woman whom he had married in love and faith. It touched his pity, he even felt remorseful for his share in the business.

"Poor devil!" he said aloud. "And, as an inducement to him to 'remain dead,' did you tell him that you had just engaged yourself to another man?"

"No," she said furiously; "I told him nothing of the sort. I could not bear the sight of him all mutilated like that; it made me sick. Besides," she went on, "what had he to offer? His reputation was gone, and so have the rank and fortune which I expected."

"That's frank; but he is scarcely responsible, is he?" answered Dick drily. "You see, poor Rupert was always an awful fool. It is even conceivable that he may have believed that you married him for himself. Really, it is a funny story. But I say, Edith, has it occurred to you, being the kind of man he is, what an utter devil he must think you?"

"I don't care what he thinks," she said wildly. "The whole conditions are changed, and I could not be expected to live with him as my husband; indeed, we should have nothing to live on."

"You think you don't care now, but perhaps you will some day," sneered Dick. "Well, what's the game? Am I to keep this dark?"

"I think you had better for your own sake," she answered, and added meaningly: "With Rupert dead, and dead I am sure he will remain, there is only one child's life between you and an inheritance of a million of money, or its worth. But with him alive, it is another matter, so perhaps you will do well not to resurrect him."

"Perhaps I shall," said Dick. "By Jove! Edith, you are a cool hand,' and he looked at her, not without admiration. "And now please tell me exactly what our relations are to

be in the future? As I don't want to be mixed up with a bigamy case—for fellows like that have an awkward trick of reappearing—marriage seems out of the question, doesn't it?"

"Absolutely!" answered Edith.

"Then might I ask what is in the question?"

"Nothing at all," replied Edith firmly. "Don't suppose for one moment that I am going to be involved in any wretched irregularity with its inevitable end."

"What's the inevitable end, my dear?"

"Where men like you are concerned, desertion and exposure, I imagine."

"You are not complimentary to-day, Edith, though perhaps you are right. These hole-and-corner businesses always finish in misery; very often in mutual detestation. But now, just see what a mess you have made by trying to get everything. You married Rupert, whom you cordially disliked, and won't stick to him because somebody has cut off his foot and Devene has got an heir. You engaged yourself to me, who, up to the present, at any rate, you cordially liked, and now you won't stick to me, not from any motives of high morality, which one might respect, but for fear of the consequences. So it seems that there is only one person to whom you will stick, and that is your precious self. Well, I wish you joy of the choice, Edith, but speaking as a candid friend, I don't personally know anyone who has held better cards and thrown them under the table. Now the table is left, that is all, a nice, hard, polished table, and you can look in it at the reflection of your own pretty face till you grow tired. There is one thing, I shan't be jealous, because what applies to me will apply to any other man. As your own husband is not good enough for you, you will have to do without the lot of us, though whether you will have cause to be jealous of *me* is another matter. Do you see the point, dearest?"

"Do you see the door, Dick?" she answered, pointing towards it.

"Very well done," he said, mocking her, "quite in our local leading lady's best tragedy manner. But I forgot, you have had practice lately with poor old Rupert. Well, I will follow his example. Good-day, Edith!" and with a most polite bow he went.

To say that he left Edith in a rage would be to put the matter too mildly, for his bitter slings and arrows had worked her into such a fury that she could only find relief in tears.

"If it hadn't been for him," she reflected to herself, when she recovered a little, "I don't think I should have turned Rupert away like that, and this is my reward. And what's more, I believe that I have been a fool. After all, Rupert is a gentleman and Dick—isn't. Those doctors are so clever that they might have mended him up and made him look respectable; the official business could have been explained, for I am certain he did nothing he shouldn't do, and perhaps he may still be Lord Devene in the end. Whereas, what am I now? A young widow who daren't marry again, and who must starve for the rest of her life upon a thousand a year. Why should I be so cruely treated? Fate must have a grudge against me. It is too bad, too bad, and as for Dick, I hate him worse than Rupert."

So she said and thought, yet during the years that followed, at any rate outwardly, this pair made it up, after a fashion, as they always did. To her determination to be involved in nothing compromising, Edith remained quite firm, although Dick, in his rôle of a man of the world, did his best to shake her scruples whenever he saw an opportunity, arguing that Rupert must be really dead, and that it would even be safe for them to marry. These, however, were, as it chanced, greatly strengthened by Dick himself, who, as time went on, progressively disimproved.

To begin with, his good looks, which were so striking in his a cod
"And h, entirely left him. He grew fat, and as is not uncommon

with those in whom the southern blood is strong, who sit up late at night, drink more than is good for them, and in general live fast, Dick acquired also an appearance that is best described as "greasy." His rich colour departed, leaving his cheeks tallow-like in hue, whereas beneath the eyes that used to be so fine and eloquent appeared deep, black lines, while his wavy, chestnut-coloured hair became quite dark, and on the top of his head melted into baldness. In short, within seven years of the conversation recorded above, Dick was nothing more than a middle-aged gentleman of somewhat unpleasing aspect, who no longer appealed in the slightest to Edith's æsthetic tastes. Moreover, now again his reputation was as seedy as his looks, for to those first-class companies of which he was a director, in his desire for money to satisfy his extravagant mode of life, he had added others of a more doubtful character, his connection with one of which landed him in a scandal, whence he only escaped by the help of Lord Devene. The House, too, to which he still belonged had discovered that there was nothing in him after all, and left him to sink to the level of an undistinguished private member. Lastly, his health was far from good, and he had been warned by the doctors that unless he entirely altered his way of life, the liver attacks from which he suffered might develop into something very serious. Meanwhile, they did not improve his temper.

. . . . . .

More than seven years had gone by since that New Year's Eve on which Rupert, rejected by Edith, wiped the mud of London off his feet for ever, when the terrible blow fell on Lord Devene which crushed out the last sparks of his proud and bitter spirit. Of a sudden, his only child—for no others were born to him—the bright and beautiful boy whom he idolised, was seized by some sickness of the brain, which, in spite of all that skill could do for him, carried him off within a week. Thus it came about that once more Rupert, who was

supposed to be dead, was left heir-presumptive to the Devene title and settled property.

The mother accepted her loss with characteristic patience and courage. She had never expected that the boy would live, and was not surprised at his decease. But such a blow as this was more than Lord Devene could bear. Here his philosophy failed him, and he had no other comfort to which to fly. Moreover, now, the title would become extinct, and so much of the property as he could not leave away must pass into the worthless hands of Dick Learmer. Under these circumstances, his thoughts turned once more to his natural daughter, Edith. He even sent for Dick, and much as he despised and hated the man, suggested that he should marry her, of course without telling him his real reason.

"It is time you settled yourself in life, if ever you are going to do so," he said, "and the same remark applies to Edith, who must have had enough of being a widow. You will be a rich man when I am gone, and in this pure and virtuous land it would be easy enough to purchase the re-creation of the title. A matter of £50,000 judiciously spent on the Party will do that in a year or so—even for you. What do you say?"

"Only that I have been trying to marry Edith for the last seven years and she won't have me," answered Dick.

"Why not? I thought she was so fond of you."

"Used to be, you mean. I don't think she is now."

"Ah! she may have heard of your way of life, you know, as many other people have; but perhaps your new prospects"—and he winced as he said the words—"may make a difference."

"I doubt it," said Dick. "She has got a craze in her head; believes that Rupert may still be living."

Lord Devene looked at him so sharply that next moment he was sorry he had spoken the words.

"That's a very odd craze, Dick," he said, "after so many

years. I should not have thought Edith was a woman given to such fancies. I suggest that you should try to disabuse her. See what you can do, and we will talk over the matter again. Now good-bye; I'm tired."

When the door closed behind Dick, Lord Devene began to piece together in his own mind certain rumours that had reached him of late, but been forgotten under pressure of his great grief. For instance, he had read in a paper a paragraph about some white man, said to have been an officer whose death was reported long ago, who in reality was still living in a desert oasis which he ruled. Now, was it possible that this white man could be Rupert? Was it possible that the letter which he had sent him on the day of his marriage informing him of his wife's true parentage had so upset him that he determined never to return to her? It was very improbable —but still—it might be worth while making a few inquiries.

He ordered his brougham and drove down to a club where he often met Lord Southwick at this hour of the day. As it chanced, in the smoking-room, which was otherwise quite deserted, he was the first man whom he saw. They had not spoken together since the death of his son, and Lord Southwick took the opportunity to offer some condolences.

"Don't speak of it, my dear fellow," answered Devene; "it is very kind of you, but I can't bear the subject. All my hopes were centred on that boy, and there's an end. Had Ullershaw still been living now, it would have been some consolation, but I suppose that he must be dead too."

"Why do you say 'suppose'?" asked Lord Southwick sharply.

"Well, if you want to know, because of certain fancies that have come into my head. Now tell me, have you heard anything?"

"Yes, I have, and I was going to speak to you on the matter. Some queer things have come to my knowledge lately. First of all, we have found out that all that yarn

with which Dick Learmer stuffed up my late chief is nonsense, for that Egyptian sergeant, Abdullah, was mortally wounded a few months ago, and before he died made a confession that he had told lies, and that he ran away at the very beginning of the fight between Ullershaw and those Arab rascals. So, of course, he didn't see him killed as he said he did."

"Oh! But what yarn of Learmer's do you mean?"

"Why, that Ullershaw had taken up with some pretty native woman and was travelling with her. Learmer gave us to understand that he had private confirmation of the fact, and, perhaps foolishly, we believed him, and that's what made my old chief so wild with your cousin. Now it appears from Abdullah's statement, which has just been forwarded home, as they say out there, 'to clear the shadow that has fallen upon the reputation of a very gallant officer,' all that Ullershaw did was to give escort to two helpless females across the desert, partly from charity and partly because he thought that their presence would make his caravan look more like a trading expedition."

"I see," said Lord Devene; but to himself he added: "Dick again! What a cowardly, black-hearted scoundrel! Well, is there any more?"

"Yes. You may remember it was stated in Parliament that this abortive expedition had cost the authorities about £2,000. Well, within the last year, £2,000 have been paid into the Treasury from a source that we cannot trace, accompanied by a rather involved written message to this effect: 'That the money was to be applied to reimburse the costs incurred in the diplomatic mission to certain chiefs on the borders of the Soudan, in the fitting out and providing with funds of the expedition under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Ullershaw, C.B., by a person who desires to clear away the reproach that had been laid upon him of having been the cause of a waste of public money.' Now did you, or his widow, do this?"

"Most certainly not!" answered Lord Devene, with a touch of his old sarcasm. "Are either of us people likely to repay to Government money to which they have no legal claim? How did the cash come?"

"Through a bank that would only say that it had been received from its branch in Egypt. Further, reports have reached us that the Tama oasis, which no one has visited for generations, is now virtually ruled by a white man who is said to have been a British officer, although its real chief is a woman. This woman, who is called the lady Mea, or after her territory, Tama simply, has recently put herself in communication with the Egyptian Government, demanding to be accorded its protection, and offering to pay taxes, etc. The style of the letter made it certain that it was never written by an Arab woman, so a political officer was sent to see into the matter. He got to the oasis, and found that it is a perfect garden, and very rich, having of late established an enormous trade in dates, salt, horses, etc., with the surrounding tribes. Of the white man, however, he saw nothing, his questions on the point being politely ignored. Still he did hear by side winds that such a person exists. That is all I can tell you about the thing, but it might be worth your while to follow it up. I hope you will indeed, and still more, that Ullershaw may prove to be alive. In my opinion, he has been a cruelly-treated man, and it is just possible that a fellow of his character, knowing this and not caring to defend himself, has chosen to remain lost."

"Thank you, I will," said Lord Devene, and going home he wrote a note to Edith telling her to come to see him.

CHAPTER XX

REVELATIONS

As it happened, Edith had just left London for a week to stay with friends in Cornwall, and therefore could not obey Lord Devene's summons till after her return. When at length she did arrive, she was shocked at the change in his appearance.

"You think that I look ill?" he said, reading her mind.

"Yes, I must say that I do, Cousin George," she answered, as she contemplated his snow-white hair, shrunken figure, and thin face worn with sorrow and weariness.

"Well, you see, I am no longer young. Threescore and ten are the full years of man, and I have just completed them. But that's not the worst of it; the old sleeplessness is back upon me with a vengeance. I have scarcely closed my eyes for six nights. This last job, the loss of my poor boy, has finished me, and now I don't care how quickly I follow him into the dark; the sooner the better, I think; yes, the sooner the better."

"Don't say that," said Edith gently. "I hope that you have a good many years before you."

"No, no, nor months, nor perhaps weeks," he added slowly. "My treadmill is nearly finished, the accursed wheel is going to stop. But," he went on swiftly, as thought to prevent her answering him, "I have sent for you to talk about your affairs, not mine. Why will you not marry Dick Learmer?"

"Do you consider him a desirable man for a woman to marry, Cousin George?"

"No, I don't. He has gone all to bits of late, and he

doesn't exactly give off an odour of sanctity, does he? In fact, if you ask me my private opinion as his relative, who has had the honour of supporting him more or less for many years, I should say that he was about as big a blackguard as you could find in London, and I have always wondered how you could care twopence about him."

"And yet you suggest that I should marry him."

"Well, you know he is going to be a rich man, and you might as well have your share. But I understand that you won't."

"No," said Edith decidedly, "I won't. He did fascinate me rather once, but I have got over that, and now I dislike him. It is curious how we change in these matters—only I wish I had seen the truth earlier."

"Yes, so do I. If you had, perhaps you would have gone to Egypt when you thought fit to stay at home. Well, if you won't commit bigamy, which I admit is an awkward thing to do, why not make it up with Rupert?"

Edith gasped and sank back in her chair.

"How do you—I mean, what do you know?" she exclaimed. "Has Dick told you?"

"Ho!" said this wise old man, drawing his white eyebrows together, "so Master Dick has a finger in this pie too, has he? He has not only murdered Rupert; he has buried him also."

"Murdered!"

"What else do you call it when *he* got him sent off to Egypt on his wedding day upon a particularly dangerous mission, and when, on the failure of that mission and his reported death, *he* even took the opportunity to poison the minds of his chiefs and so blacken his memory."

"So he really did those things?" remarked Edith reflectively.

"Certainly; I will give you chapter and verse for it if you like. But about Rupert." He paused, and drew a bow at a venture. "What happened when you saw him?"

"So Dick *has* told you," she said. "Well, if he will lie

about one thing, he will lie about another. But why force me to repeat the story?"

"Because I should like to hear it first-hand. What happened, and when?"

"Over seven years ago," answered Edith hoarsely, "Rupert came back, on New Year's Eve, a Sunday, after Dick had been to lunch. He was dressed in horrible rough clothes, and his hair was long and tangled like that of a wild man. His foot had been cut off, and his left eye put out by those savages there in the Soudan. They tortured him because he would not become a Mahommedan,"

"Ah!" said Lord Devene, "personally I think that the Mahommedan religion has points, but—plucky fellow, Rupert; it might have recommended him to some women. Well?"

"Well, he was horrible to me. As a friend I could scarcely have borne him, but as a husband—oh! you know."

"I think you said that Dick had been to luncheon, did you not? Now, had he perhaps suggested himself as what on a Board of Directors is called an alternative?"

"He had asked me to marry him," replied Edith, dropping her head.

"With the usual concomitants, I suppose, and perhaps had not been too roughly rebuffed. He was better-looking then, wasn't he? Well, under the circumstances, no doubt, a mere martyr in badly fitting clothes, and without a foot, would have seemed horrible to any refined young woman. Husbands often assume that appearance to wives who chance to have followed their finer instincts, and fallen in love with somebody else. But what became of our martyr? Is he now preaching Christianity among the benighted Mahommedans?"

"You are cruel to me," said Edith, with something like a sob.

"Then learn patience from the example of the martyr, who seems to have suffered much without complaining, for conscience' sake—like you, dear Edith, and—answer the question."

"I told him," she said, in a low voice, "that as he was dead,

he had better remain dead. He went away; I don't know what became of him, or whether he is alive or not."

"Then allow me to reassure your anxious heart upon that point. To the best of my belief, unless I am very much mistaken, the admirable Rupert is at present living in an oasis called Tama, somewhere in the desert, not far from the Soudan; I don't know the exact locality, but doubtless it can easily be ascertained. Moreover, he has prospered better than most martyrs do, for with characteristic folly, he has paid back £2,000, which he did not owe, to the Government, in some particularly stupid and roundabout fashion. By the way, you never claimed his insurance, did you? No. Well, that's lucky, for you might have been prosecuted. To return —in this happy oasis, as I believe, Rupert lives at ease, assisting its fair ruler to govern some primitive community, who apparently grow dates and manufacture salt for his and her benefit, for he seems to have relaxed his iron principles sufficiently to allow himself to contract a morganatic marriage, of which, under the circumstances, you will be the last to complain."

"I don't believe it," said Edith, with some energy. "It's not like Rupert to break his word."

"It would be like a born idiot if he didn't. Why should you have a monopoly in that respect?" Lord Devene answered, with withering sarcasm. "But perhaps the best thing to do would be to go and find out. Look here, Edith!" he said, dropping his bitter, bantering tone, "I have never set up for virtue; I hate the name of it as it is commonly used, but I must tell you that I think you an exceedingly wicked woman. What business have you to treat the man whom you had married in this way, just because you had been philandering with that accursed Dick, and because he had lost his leg and his prospects of a title? Well, his leg won't grow again, but the title is sprouting finely. Hadn't you better make haste and secure it? Lady Devene sounds better than Mrs.

Ullershaw, relict of a forgotten colonel in the Egyptian army. Also, perhaps you would be happier as the wife of an honourable man than as the friend of Dick Learmer."

"I'm not his friend," replied Edith indignantly, "—now after what you have told me, for it was base to try to blacken the reputation of a dead man. Also, I don't like him at all; his ways of life and even his appearance disgust me."

"I am glad to hear it," said Lord Devene.

"As for your reproaches about poor Rupert," she went on, "you find it convenient to forget that it was you who forced me into that marriage. I never pretended to be in love with him, although it is true that now, when I am older, I see things in a different light, and have more regard for him than ever I had before."

"Now, when you have escaped from the blighting shadow of the other man's influence, you mean, Edith. But, whatever the reason, better late than not at all. You blame me for having, by a gift of £25,000, etc., 'forced' you into the marriage. Well, would you like to know why I did so?"

"Yes; I should very much."

"Then I see no reason why I should not tell you—now. It was because you happen to be my daughter, Edith."

She gasped again, then said: "Is that the truth, or one of your bad jokes?"

"The truth. I would rather not enter on the subject with you, but you can have your mother's statement to read afterwards, if you like, and I don't know that the fact need distress you."

"It distresses me very much," answered Edith bitterly. "Hitherto I always thought that my mother was honest, and that my father was a good if a foolish man. Now those illusions have gone, like the rest, and now, too, I understand where all that is bad in me came from, and that my odd dislike of Rupert was inherited—for I have heard that story from Dick."

Even the hardened Lord Devene winced a little beneath these bitter shafts.

"It would seem, my dear Edith," he said, "that your powers of offensive speech are at least your own, since mine, which some people think considerable, are put to the blush by them."

"I pay you back in your own coin, that is all. For an hour you have sat there mocking and insulting me, tearing me to pieces and stamping on me, ending up with the information that I am—what I am. Do you wonder, then, that I retaliate? Cousin—I beg your pardon, but how do you wish me to address you in future? Well," she went on, without waiting for an answer, "I am glad that Rupert knew nothing about it, for at any rate, as I think you once said, he was the only respectable man in the family, and he might have felt aggrieved under all the circumstances."

"It is highly probable that he did. Do you remember a letter which the footman gave to him at the train when he was starting for Egypt after your marriage? Yes? Well, that letter informed him of our exact relationship, leaving it optional with him to pass on the facts to you, or not, as he liked."

"He never said a word," exclaimed Edith. "No, not even in that scene when we parted, and he might so easily have used what he knew to hurt me. Oh! he is different to us all—he is different."

"Quite so, and that is why I wished you to marry him. Also, then as now he was going to get the title and the property, and, unnatural creature though you think me to be, I had, as it happened, a wish that you should share those temporalities. Indeed I have it still, and that is why I desire and implore that you should make it up with Rupert if he is still living. Listen, Edith!" he went on earnestly, "you are still a beautiful and admired woman, but you are now well past your youth, and soon the admirers will fall away and you haven't many real friends, and can't marry anyone else to protect and look after

you. So I suggest that for your own sake you should take refuge with a husband in whom you yourself admit that there is much to esteem. Edith, my days are almost done; it is very probable that I shall have no further opportunity of talking to you upon this or any other subject. I urge you therefore as one who, being responsible for your presence in the world, has your welfare most earnestly at heart, to promise me that you will make inquiries, and if you find that Rupert is living, as I believe, that you will go to him, for he will certainly not come to you, and ask his pardon for the past. Will you do it?"

"I—think so," she answered slowly, "and yet, after all that has been—oh! how can I? And how will he receive me?"

"I am not sure," answered Lord Devene. "Were I in his place, I know how I should receive you," he added, with a grim little laugh; "but Rupert is a forbearing creature. The trouble is that he may have formed other ties. All I can suggest is that you should be patient and try to work upon his feelings and sense of duty. Now I have said all I can, and shall say no more who have other things to think of. You have made your own bed, Edith, and if you can't re-make it, you must lie on it as it is, that's all. Good-bye!"

She rose and held out her hand.

"Before you go," he said, with a nervous little clearing of the throat, "—it seems weak I know, but I should like to hear you say that you forgive me, not about the Rupert business, for there I am sure I did the best I could for you, but for bringing you into this world at all. So far, I admit, whoever's the fault may be, you do not seem to have made a great success of it, any more than I have. As you know, I am troubled by no form of the common superstitions of our age, holding as I do that we are the purest accidents, born like gnats from the life-creating influences of sun and air and moisture, developed out of matter and passing back into matter, to live again as matter, whereof our intellect is but a

manifestation, and no more. Still I cannot help acknowledging, after many years of observation, that there does seem to be some kind of fate which influences the affairs of men, and at times brings retribution on them for their follies and mistakes. If that is so, Edith, it is this fate which you should blame," and the old man looked at her almost appealingly.

"No," she answered, in a cold voice. "Once I remember, when I did not know that you were my father, I told you that I loved you—I suppose that the kinship of our blood prompted me. Now when I know how close that kinship is, and in what way it came about, by the disgrace of my mother during the life-time of her husband, I love you no more. It is not the fate that I blame, but you, you—its instrument, who were free to choose the better part."

"So be it," replied Lord Devene quietly. "Apply those words to your own life, Edith, and by them let it be judged as you have judged me."

Then they parted.

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Edith kept her promise. Going to a great lawyer, famous for his investigations of difficult matters, she told him merely that rumours had reached her to the effect that her husband, who for many years had been supposed to be dead, was in reality alive in the Soudan, or in its bordering desert, and suggested that he should put himself in communication with Lord Southwick and the Egyptian authorities with the object of ascertaining the truth, and if necessary send someone out to Egypt. The lawyer made notes, said that the matter should be followed up, and that he would keep her advised as to the results of his inquiries. Thereupon Edith, who, after their last bitter and tragic interview, did not wish to see anything more at present of the man whom she must believe to be her father, left town, as indeed it was her custom to do during the

month of August, and went away to Scotland. When she had been there nearly six weeks, she received one morning a telegram from Lady Devene, which was dated from Grosvenor Square and read:

"Come here at once. Your Cousin George is no more. I want your help."

Shocked by this news she managed to catch the midday train to London. At Rugby she saw the placard of an evening paper. On it, among other news' headings, was printed: "Sad death of a well-known peer." She bought the paper, and after some search found a short paragraph which said:

"We regret to announce that Lord Devene was found dead in bed at his house in Grosvenor Square this morning. The cause of his death is not yet known." Then followed some biographical details and these words: "As Lord Devene lost his only son some months ago, it is believed that the peerage becomes extinct. The settled property, however, passes to his cousin, Richard Learmer, Esq., M.P."

From the station Edith drove direct to Grosvenor Square and was received by Tabitha in the drawing-room. There she sat in her black dress, sad-faced, calm, imposing, like an incarnation, Edith thought, of that fate whereof her father had spoken to her at their last interview. They embraced each other without warmth, for at heart these two women were not friends.

"How did it happen?" asked Edith.

"He died as her first ladyship died," answered the widow, "by an overdose of chloral. You know he could never sleep."

"How did he come to take an overdose?" asked Edith again.

"I do not know," she answered meaningly; "perhaps the doctors they can tell you. Would you like to see him?"

"No," said Edith, with a shudder; "I had rather not."

"Ach!" said Lady Devene, "I forgot; you did always run away from the sick and fear the dead; it is your nature."

"Are you sorry?" said Edith curiously, perhaps to change the conversation.

"Yes; for his soul which goes to its reward I am sorry, for he did not repent before he died, who had many things of which he should repent. For myself I am not sorry, for I have done my duty by him, and now at last the chains do fall off my neck and God has set me free to give me time to make my peace with Him before I die also."

Then saying that she must get some food, Edith left her, for she did not wish to pursue this painful conversation.

If the doctors of whom Lady Devene had spoken suspected anything unusual, they were singularly reticent upon the point. All they could or would say was that Lord Devene, who for many years had been in the habit of taking chloral to combat his constitutional sleeplessness, had on this particular night taken too much. So the usual verdict was returned: "Death from misadventure, the cause being an overdose of chloral," and many comments were made on the curious fact that Lord Devene and his first wife should have come to a precisely similar end.

The will, which had been executed after the death of the little boy, was found to be very short. It made no mention of the entailed property, leaving the next heir to establish his claim, and after stating that the testator's wife was provided for by settlement, appointed Edith Ullershaw residuary legatee without restrictions. This sounded simple enough, but when matters came to be looked into it was found that Edith took real and personal estate to the value of £200,000. Subject to the life-interest of the widow, even the house in Grosvenor Square was hers, so she was now a rich woman.

"Ach! my dear Edith," said Lady Devene, when she learned that she had a right to continue to live in the great mansion, "take it, take it at once. I hate the place. Two thousand pounds a year, that is plenty for me—£500 to live on, and £1,500 to give away Yes, at last the poor shall get some of all those monies which have been collected out of their toil and their drink-vices."

Needless to say, the exultant Dick swooped upon the settled property like a famished hawk, demanding to be declared its rightful possessor. But then arose a most unpleasant hitch, for just at this time there came a letter to Edith from her lawyers, announcing that they had received telegraphic advices from the agent whom they had despatched to Egypt, informing them that it appeared to be almost certain that the white man who was living in the oasis Tama was none other than that Colonel Rupert Ullershaw who was supposed to have been killed many years before. The lawyer added that, on their own responsibility, and on behalf of her husband, whom they believed to be alive and the present Lord Devene, they had made representations in the proper quarter, as a result of which no one would be allowed to touch the settled property until the matter was thoroughly investigated.

Of course all this strange story soon found its way into the newspapers, and many were the rapturous congratulations which Edith received, even from persons with whom she had the very smallest acquaintance. Meanwhile the lawyers had again been in communication with their agent, who was established at Wady-Halfa. A second telegram was received from this capable and enterprising person, announcing that with great difficulty he had succeeded in reaching the oasis, and in sending a message to Colonel Ullershaw, informing him of his accession to the title, adding, however, that all his lordship had replied was, that he did not want the title, and refused to leave the place.

"It would appear," went on their letter to Edith, covering

this cable, "that his lordship has suffered somewhat mentally from long confinement among these savages, who, we are informed, have cut off his foot to prevent his escaping, as they regard him as a god who has brought them great prosperity which would vanish if he left them. We presume, therefore, that your ladyship will proceed to Egypt as soon as possible and use your personal influence to withdraw him from his unhappy situation. We are informed that the people of the oasis are peaceable, but, if necessary, that the authorities will give you any assistance which may be required."

Now the whole thing was out, and became a subject of general conversation at a hundred dinner tables. Moreover, it was rumoured that some years before Rupert Ullershaw had actually been seen in London. General Sir Alfred Alltalk declared that he had met him upon the steps of the Army and Navy Club, and a further ill-natured tale was whispered that he had come to see his wife, who would have nothing to do with him, because at that time he had ceased to be heir to the peerage. This story, which Edith was not wrong in ascribing to the indiscreet or malicious utterances of Dick, who was furious with disappointment and thirsting for revenge, soon reached her ears. Of course she contradicted it, but equally of course she had now no alternative but to go to Egypt.

"Ach!" said the Dowager Lady Devene, when Edith expatiated to her upon the hardship and dangers of the journey which she must undertake alone—"ach! if that is all, I will come with you as a companion. I am not afraid, and I have always wished to see the land where Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites. We will start next week, and in a month I hope to see my dear Rupert again—almost as much as you do," she added, looking at Edith sideways.

Now as this speech was made before several other people, Edith had no choice but to acquiesce, and indeed it had come to this—she also wished to see Rupert. Even in her somewhat flinty heart remorse had been at work of late years;

also, she had wearied of her lonely life, and wished to put a stop to the scandals that were floating about concerning her, which, as she foresaw, would soon culminate in her being exposed to much annoyance from Dick. In fact, he was already threatening to blackmail her and making unpleasant remarks as to certain indiscreet letters that she had written to him after Rupert's visit to London, in which that visit and other matters showing the extreme intimacy which existed between them were alluded to not too obscurely. So she arranged to depart for the East, accompanied by Lady Devene.

Before they sailed, she received a packet from the late Lord Devene's bankers, which, they stated by the mouth of a confidential clerk, they had been directed to deliver to her one month after his death, and not before. On opening it she found that it contained that statement concerning herself made by her mother, to which Lord Devene had alluded. Also, there were two letters from him, one addressed to her and the other to Rupert, the latter being left open that she might read it.

That to herself was brief, and ran:

"I have given you all I can. Accept this wealth as a make-weight to the initial wrong I did to you by becoming your father. I was weak enough to hope that when I revealed that fact to you, you would show some affection towards a lonely and broken-hearted man. You, however, took another view, irritated perhaps by our previous somewhat acrimonious conversation. I grieve to say that on such argumentative occasions I have never been quite able to master my tongue, and as you remarked, you seem to have inherited the weakness. At least I have not cared to expose myself to a second rebuff. I do not blame you, but it is true that from that day forward I made up my mind to end an existence which has become hateful to me. If its dregs could have been sweetened by the

love of one who is, after all, my child, I should probably have been content to endure its physical and mental miseries whilst awaiting their natural termination. But it has been destined otherwise, so like some of those old Romans whom I so much admire, my day done, I go from this hated scene out into the utter darkness whence I came. Good-bye! May you be happier than your father, "D."

It was a horrible letter for a daughter to receive from the author of her being, but fortunately it did not affect Edith so much as would have been the case with many women. She felt that there was a certain injustice about the thing. To begin with, her father had taken her at her word after the incomprehensible male habit. Then she had spoken when utterly irritated, first by his bitter gibes and sarcasms, and secondly by being suddenly informed that she was quite another person than she had supposed herself to be for over thirty years. Still, now when it was too late, she felt grieved. It was generally Edith's lot to be grieved—too late. Yes, she was grieved, no more, when others might have been paralysed with horror and unavailing remorse.

Afterwards, she took out of its envelope and read the letter to Rupert. Here it is:

"DEAR DEVENE,—For I give you the name which will be yours when you read this, if you should ever do so.

"I have learned all your story, or if not all of it, at least enough to show me how accurate was the estimate which I formed of you long ago. Had not fortune fought against you, you would have been a great man, if such a creature really exists, which I doubt, since in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand, 'great' is only a popular translation of the vulgar word 'successful.'

"I write now to express the sincere hope that if, as I believe,

you are still living, you and Edith, forgetting your previous diversities, and many another trouble and sorrow, will agree to live together in the accustomed, time-hallowed fashion, and if possible leave children behind you to carry on the race. Not that it is worth carrying on, except, perhaps, for certain qualities of your own, but one must make sacrifices upon the altars of habit and sentiment. For what other possible reason can the populations of the earth be continued? Yet there is one—Nature—(perhaps in the wilderness you have found out what that word means)—commands what the good sense of her most cultivated children condemns as entirely useless and undesirable. Perhaps there is some ultimate object in this, though personally I can see none. To me it appears to be nothing more than a part of the blind brutality of things which decrees the continuance, at any rate for a little while, of the highly nervous, overbred and unsatisfactory animal called Man. Well, soon or late he will die of his own sufferings, that increase daily as he advances in the scale of progressive degeneracy, which he dignifies by the name of civilisation. Then perhaps Nature (God is your name for it) will enjoy a good laugh over the whole affair, but as human tears will have ceased to fall, what will that matter?

"Edith will tell you of the fashion of my end; how, worn out at length by grief—one of the worst gifts of the said civilisation, for the savage feels little—and bodily weakness—the worst gift of our primeval state, I have determined to put an end to both, though this is a fact which there is no need for you to blazon abroad.

"I can see you solemnly lifting your eyes and saying: 'Lo! a judgment. What the man drove that unfortunate woman to has fallen back upon his own head. (Under the circumstances "unfortunate" is the exact word that you will use, tempered by a romantic sigh, whereas, in fact, poor Clara was but a very ordinary and middle-class kind of sinner, who did not even shrink from the ruin of the boy whom she pretended

to love.) How wonderful is the retribution of Providence! The same death, the same means of death!'

"Well, you will be quite wrong. Whether one suffers from sleeplessness or from the fear of intolerable exposure does not matter. One takes the most convenient method to end it, and in this case they happen to be identical. There is no Providence, no poetic justice about the business, nothing but what novelists, or rather their critics, call the 'long arm of coincidence.'

"Good-bye! I wonder what you have been doing all these years in the Soudan. I should like to hear the story from you; I am sure that it must be interesting. But I am quite convinced that I shall never have the chance. Nothing is absolutely certain except the absolute nothingness that awaits us all.—Believe me, my dear Devene, yours more sincerely than you may think, "DEVENE."

"What an odd letter," thought Edith, as she returned the sheets to their envelope. "I don't quite understand all of it, but I think that under other circumstances my father might have been a very different man. I wonder if we are quite responsible for what we do, or if the circumstances are responsible? If so, who makes the circumstances?"

CHAPTER XXI

ZAHED

RUPERT was disturbed in his mind. No one was less superstitious. He had advanced spiritually beyond the reach of superstition. He had grasped the great fact still not understood by the vast majority of human beings, that the universe and their connection with it is a mighty mystery whereof nine hundred and ninety-nine parts out of a thousand are still veiled to men. These are apt to believe, as Lord Devene believed, that this thousandth part which they see bathed in the vivid, daily sunlight is all that there is to see. They imagine that because only one tiny angle of the great jewel catches and reflects the light, the rest must be dark and valueless. They look upon the point of rock showing above the ocean and forget that in its secret depths lies hid a mountain range, an island, a continent, a world, perhaps, whereof this topmost peak alone appears.

With Rupert, to whom such reflections were familiar, it was not so. Yet perhaps, because he remembered that every outward manifestation, however trivial, doubtless has its root in some hidden reason, and that probably the thing we call coincidence does not in truth exist, it did trouble and even alarm him when, riding one morning with Mea down a deep cleft in Tama, he heard upon the cliff, to the right of them, the wild and piercing music of the Wandering Players. Looking up, he saw upon the edge of that cliff those strange musicians, swathed as before in such a fashion that their faces were invisible, three of them blowing on their pipes and two

keeping time with the drums, for the benefit, apparently, of the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, since no biped was near to them.

He hailed them angrily from the valley, but they took not the slightest notice, only blew more weirdly and beat the louder. He tried to get up to them, but discovered that in order to do so he must ride round for five miles. This he accomplished at last, only to find that they were gone, having probably slipped down the slope of the mountain away into their home, the desert. Indeed, it was reported to him afterwards that some people, accompanied by two donkeys, had been seen in the distance tramping across the sand.

"Why are you so vexed, Rupert?" asked Mea, when they descended the cliffs again, after their fruitless search.

"I don't know," he answered, with a laugh, "but that music is associated with disagreeable recollections in my mind. The first time we heard it, you remember, was just before I lost my foot and eye, and the next time was as I embarked upon the ship on my way to England, an unhappy journey. What have they come for now, I wonder?"

"I don't know," she answered, with her sweet smile; "but I at least have no cause to fear them. After their first visit I saved you; after their second you came back to me."

"And after their third—?" asked Rupert.

"After their third I have said, I do not know; but perhaps it means that we shall take a long journey together."

"If that's all, I don't care," he replied. "What I dread is our taking journeys away from each other."

"I thank you," she answered, bowing to him gravely, "your words are pleasant to me, and I bless those musicians who made you speak them, as I am sure that our roads branch no more."

So, still smiling at each other like two happy children, they rode on. They visited the salt works which Rupert had established to the enormous benefit of everyone in the oasis.

Passing through groves of young date-palms that he had planted, they came to the breeding grounds of camels, mules, and horses, the last of which had attained a great reputation, and having inspected the studs, turned back through the irrigated lands that now each year produced two crops instead of one.

"You have done well for us, Rupert," said Mea, as they headed homewards. "Tama has not been so wealthy since the days of my forefathers, who called themselves kings, and now that the Khalifa is broken and the land has become safe, this is but a beginning of riches."

"I don't know about that," he answered, with his jolly laugh, "but I have done very well for myself. Do you know that out of my percentage I have saved more money than I can spend? Now I am going to build a hospital and hire a skilled man to attend to it, for I am tired of playing doctor."

"Yes," she answered, "I have thought of it before, only I said nothing because it means bringing white folk into the place, and we are so happy without them. Also, our people do not like strangers."

'I understand," he answered; "but the Europeans have discovered us already. It is impossible to keep them out now that we pay taxes to the Government. You remember that man a few months ago who came to tell me that I am Lord Devene, and that since I became so my wife is making inquiries about me. I would not see him, and you sent him away, but he, or others, will be back again soon."

"And then will you wish to leave with him, Rupert, and take your own place in the West?" she asked anxiously.

"Not I," he answered, "not if they offered to make me a king."

"Well, why should you?" Mea said, with her sweet little laugh, "who are already a king here," and she touched her breast; "and there," and she nodded towards some people

who bowed themselves before him; "and everywhere," and she waved her hand at the oasis of Tama in general.

"Well," he answered, "the first is the only crown I want."

Then, having no more words to say, this strange pair, divorced for the kingdom of Heaven's sake, yet wedded indeed, if ever man and woman have been, for truly their very souls were one, looked at each other tenderly. They had changed somewhat since we saw them last over seven years before. Their strange life had left its seal upon them both. Mea's face was thinner, the rich, full lips had a little wistful droop; the great, pleading eyes had grown spiritual, as though with continual looking over the edge of the world; the air of mystery which her features always wore had deepened; also, her figure was somewhat less rounded than it appeared in those unregenerate days when she turned herself about before Rupert, and assured him that she was "not so bad." Yet she was more beautiful now than then, only the beauty was of a different character.

Rupert, on the other hand, had greatly improved in looks. The eye that remained to him was quite bright and clear, and the flesh had healed over the other in such a fashion that it only looked as if it were shut. The scars left by the hot irons on his face had almost vanished also. The bleaching of the sun, combined with other causes, had turned his hair from red to an iron grey, to the great gain of his appearance; moreover, the wide, rough beard, which had caused Edith mentally to compare him to Orson as pictured in the fairy books of her youth, was kept short, square, and carefully trimmed. Lastly, his face, like Mea's, had fined down, till it resembled that of a powerful ascetic, which, in truth, he was. Indeed, although they were so strangely different, they had yet grown like to one another; seen in certain lights, and in their Arab robes, it would have been quite possible to mistake them for brother and sister, as their people called them among themselves.

For a long while, to these simple inhabitants of the desert, the relations between the two had been a matter of mystery. They were unable to understand why a man and woman, who were evidently everything to each other, did not marry. At first they thought that Rupert must have taken other wives among the women of the place, but finding that this was not so, secretly they applied to Bakhita to enlighten them. She informed them that because of vows that they had made, and for the welfare of their souls, this pair had agreed to adopt the doctrine of Renunciation.

Bakhita spoke with some hidden sarcasm, but as that doctrine, at any rate in theory, is, and for thousands of years has been familiar to the East, her questioners grasped the sense of the saying readily enough, and on the strength of it gave Rupert a new name. Thenceforth among them he was known as *Zahed*, which means the Renouncer—one who, fixing his eyes upon a better, thrusts aside the good things of this world. It is easy for a man who stands upon such a pedestal to be lifted a little higher, at any rate amongst Easterns. Therefore it came about that very shortly Rupert found himself revered as a saint, a holy personage, who was probably inspired by Heaven.

As he had no vices that could be discovered; as he neither drank spirituous liquors nor even smoked, having given up that habit; as he lived very simply, and gave largely to the poor; as he was noted for the great cures he worked by his doctoring; as he dispensed justice with an even hand, and by his hard work and ability turned the place into an Eden flowing with milk and honey; and lastly, as his military knowledge and skill in fortification made the oasis practically impregnable to attack, this reputation of his grew with a rapidity that was positively alarming. Had he wished it, it would have been easy for Rupert to assume the character of a Mahdi, and to collect the surrounding tribes under his banner to wage whatever wars he thought desirable. Needless to say, he had no

yearnings in that direction, being quite sufficiently occupied in doing all the good that lay to his hand in Tama.

Still, as he found that he was expected to address the people upon certain feast days, generally once a month, he took the opportunity, without mentioning its name, to preach his own faith to them, or at any rate the morals which that faith inculcates, with the result that after he had dwelt among them for five years, although they knew it not, the population of Tama, being Coptic by blood and therefore already inclined in that direction, was in many essentials Christian in thought and character. This was a great work for one man to do in so short a time, and as he looked around upon the result of the labours of his hand and heart, Rupert in secret was conscious of a certain pride. He felt that his misfortunes had worked together for good to others as well as to himself. He felt that he had not lived in vain, and that when he died, the seed which he had sown would bear fruit a hundredfold. Happy is the man who can know as much as this, and few there are that know it.

It was the day of the new moon, and, according to custom, Rupert was engaged in delivering his monthly address. There had been trouble in Tama. A man who had met with misfortunes after great prosperity had publicly cursed all gods and committed suicide; while another man, cruelly wronged, had taken the law into his own hands, and murdered his neighbour. On these sad examples Rupert discoursed.

Rupert and Mea, placed on this occasion upon the platform in the hall of the ancient temple, where they were in the habit of sitting side by side to administer justice, and for other public purposes, did not, as it happened, know of the approach of a party of white travellers that afternoon. It had been reported to them, indeed, that some Europeans—two women and a man, with their servants—were journeying across the desert, but as they did not understand that these wished to come to Tama, Mea contented herself with giving orders that

they should receive any food or assistance that they needed, and let the matter slip from her mind.

Her servants and the guards of the Black Pass executed this command in a liberal spirit, and when the party, through an interpreter, explained that they wished to visit the oasis, having business with its sheik, presuming that they were expected, they offered no objection, but even conducted them on their way. Only the guards asked whom they meant by the sheik, Zahed, or the lady Tama? as Zahed himself was not in the habit of receiving strangers. They inquired who Zahed might be, and were informed of the meaning of his name, also that he was a holy man, and a great *hakim* or doctor, and by birth an Englishman, who had been sent by Heaven to bless their people, and who was the "lord of the spirit" of their lady Mea.

Edith, from her high perch on the top of a tall camel, an animal which she feared and loathed, looked down at Lady Devene, who, composed as usual, but with her fair skin burnt to the colour of mahogany, sat upon a donkey as upright and as unmoved as though that animal were her own drawing-room chair. Indeed, when it fell down, as it did occasionally, she still sat there, waiting till someone lifted it up again. Tabitha was an excellent traveller; nothing disturbed her nerves. Still she preferred a donkey to a camel; it was nearer the ground, she explained. So, for the matter of that, did Edith, only she selected the latter beast because she thought, and rightly, that on it she looked less absurd.

"Tabitha," she said, "what on earth do you make of all that? Rupert seems to have turned prophet, and to be married to this woman."

"I should not wonder," answered Lady Devene, looking up at the graceful figure on the camel. "He is good stuff to make a prophet of, but as for being married, they said only that he is lord of the lady's spirit. Also, they call him the Renouncer, so I do not think that he is married."

Edith, who had gathered that this lady was still young and very good-looking, shook her head gloomily, for already she who had so little right to be so was jealous of Mea.

"I expect that only means she has made him renounce some other ones," she suggested. "Of course, it would seem wonderful to all these creatures if a man had only one wife."

"Ach! we shall see, but at any rate you cannot grumble. It is a matter for his own conscience, not for you who turned the poor man out of doors. Ach! Edith, you must have the heart of a nether millstone. But if you want to know more, tell that wretched Dick to find out. He stopped back to drink some whisky and soda."

Edith opened her white umbrella, although at the moment the sun did not reach her in the pass, and interposed it between Tabitha and herself to indicate that the conversation was finished. She did not appreciate Lady Devene's outspoken criticism, of which she had endured more than enough during the past six weeks. Nor did she wish to summon Dick to her assistance, for she knew exactly what he would say.

Here it may be explained that Dick had not been asked to be a member of this party, but when they embarked on the steamer at Marseilles, they found him there. On being questioned as to the reason of his presence, he stated quite clearly that his interests were too much concerned in the result of their investigations to allow of his being absent from them. So as they could not prevent him, with them he came, accompanied by a little retinue of his own.

For the rest of that journey, when she was not stifled by the Campsine wind, which followed them up the pass, or thinking about the joltings of the camel, and other kindred discomforts, Edith remained lost in her own meditations. Rupert was here, of this there could be no manner of doubt, and considering the fashion of their last adieux, what on earth was she to say to him when they met? Also, and this was more to the point, what would he say to her? She was still a very

pretty woman, and his wife; those were her only cards; but whether Rupert would respond when she played them remained more than doubtful. His last words to her were that he hated her, that all his nature and his soul rose up in repugnance against her; that even if she swore she loved him, he would not touch her with his finger-tips, and that he would never willingly speak to her again in this world or the next. This was fairly uncompromising, and was it likely that Rupert, that patient, obstinate Rupert, who here, it seemed, was adored by everybody, would of a sudden vary a determination in which he had persisted for more than seven years? Heartily did Edith wish that she had never come upon this wild errand.

But she had been forced into it. Dick, whom she now cordially detested and feared, but who unfortunately knew her secrets, had put stories about concerning her which made it necessary for her to act if she would save her own good repute. Rich as she was and beautiful as she was, very few respectable people would have anything to do with her in future, if it became known as a certain fact that she had rejected her own husband when he rose from the dead, merely because he was in trouble, had been physically injured, and for the time lost his prospects of a peerage. This would be too much even for a false and hypocritical world. But oh! she wished that she could be conveyed to the other end of the earth, even if she had to go there through the Campsine, and on this horrible, groaning camel.

Their road took a turn, and before them they saw the ruins of a temple, and behind it a prosperous-looking Eastern town surrounded by groves of palms and other trees. Through these they rode till they came to the surrounding brick wall of the temple, where the interpreter told them that the guide said they must dismount, because Zahed was speaking, and the people would beat them if they disturbed him.

So they obeyed, and the two of them, accompanied by the

interpreter and Dick, who had now arrived, were led through a door in the temple wall into a side chapel, which about half-way down its length opened out of the great hypostyle hall that was still filled with columns, whereof most were standing. At the mouth of this chapel, in the deep shadow behind a fallen column, whence they could see without being seen, they were told to stand still, and did so, as yet quite unnoticed. The sight before them was indeed remarkable.

All that great hall was crowded with hundreds of men, women, and children, rather light in colour, and of a high-bred Arab stamp of feature; clad, everyone of them, in clean and flowing robes, the men wearing keffiehs or head-dresses of various colours, whereof the ends hung upon their shoulders, and the women, whose faces were exposed, wimple-like hoods. On a platform raised upon some broken columns at the end of the hall were two figures, those of a man and a woman, between whom sat a grey-snouted little dog, who looked in their direction and snarled until the man reproved it.

With a kind of sudden pain, Edith recognised at the first glance that this woman was extraordinarily beautiful, although in a fashion that was new to her. The waving hair, uncovered by any veil, but retained in place by the only emblem of her ancient royalty which Mea still used, a band of dull gold whence, above her brow, rose the uræus, or hooded snake, fell somewhat stiffly upon her shoulders, its thick mass trimmed level at the ends. In it, as in a frame, was set the earnest, mysterious face wherein glowed her large and lovely eyes. Placed there on high, her rounded form wrapped in purest white did not look small, or perhaps the dignity of her mien, her folded hands and upright pose in her chair of state, seemed to add to its stature. She was smiling as she always smiled, the coral-coloured lips were slightly parted, and in the ray of sunlight that fell upon her from the open roof, Edith could distinguish the rows of perfect teeth between them, while her head was turned a little that she might watch her companion

with those wonderful and loving eyes. So *this* was the savage woman of whom she had been told, this ethereal and beautiful being with the wild, sweet face like to the face of an angel.

Mastering a desire to choke, Edith followed the woman's glance to the man at her side, for they sat together like the solemn, stately figures of husband and wife upon the Egyptian stele which years ago Rupert had brought from Egypt. Oh! it was Rupert, without a doubt, but Rupert changed. Could that noble-looking chieftain in the flowing robes of white which hid his feet, and the stately head-dress, also of white, that fell upon his broad shoulders, be the same creature who, clad in his cheap and hideous garments, she had dismissed from her drawing-room in London as repulsive beyond bearing? Then his beard was fiery red and straggling; now it was iron-grey, trimmed square, and massive like his shoulders and his head. Then the eye that remained to him was red and bloodshot; now it was large and luminous. The face also had grown spiritual, like that of his companion, a light seemed to shine upon it which smoothed away its ruggedness. If not handsome, he looked what he was—a leader of men, refined, good, noble, a man to love and to revere.

All this Edith understood in a flash, and by the light of that illumination understood also for the first time the completeness of her own wicked folly. There, set above the common crowd, adored and adorable, with his beauteous consort, was the husband whom she had cast away like dirt—for Dick's sake. He, Dick, was speaking in her ear, and she turned her head and glanced at him. His heavy eyes were staring greedily at the loveliness of Mea; his fat, yellowish cheeks lay in folds above the not too well shaven chin. He wiped his bald head with a handkerchief that was no longer clean, and smelt of cigarettes and whisky.

"By Jingo!" Dick was saying, "that little woman is something like, isn't she? No wonder our pious friend stopped in the Soudan. You are nice-looking, Edith, but you have all

your work cut out to get him away from that houri. You had better go home and apply for a divorce on the ground of desertion, just to save your face."

"Be silent," she whispered, almost in a hiss, and with a fierce flash of her eyes.

Must she listen to Dick's ribaldry at such a moment? Oh! now she was sure of it, it was he whom she hated, not Rupert.

Rupert was speaking in Arabic, and in a rich, slow voice that reached the remotest recesses of that immemorial hall, emphasising his words by quiet and dignified motions of his hands. He was speaking, and every soul of that great company, in utter silence and with heads bent in respect, hung upon his wisdom.

Tabitha poked the interpreter with the point of her white umbrella and whispered.

"Tell me, Achmet," she said, "what do his lordship say?"

Achmet listened, and from time to time interpreted the sense of Rupert's remarks in a low, rapid voice which none of the audience, who were unaware of their presence, overheard.

"The noble lord, Zabed," he informed them, "talks of gratitude to God, which some of them have forgot; he shows them how they should all be very grateful. He tells them his own story."

"Ach! that is interesting," said Lady Devene. "Go on, Achmet. I did always want to hear that story."

Achmet bowed and continued: "He says to his dear children that he tells them this story that they may learn by that example how grateful all people should be to Allah. He says that when he was a boy he fell into deep sin, as perhaps some of them have done, but God saved him then, and speaking by the voice of his mother, made him promise to sin no more in that way, which promise he kept, though he had sinned much in other ways. Then God lifted him up, and from a person of no estate made him one of importance, and, God preserving him all the time, he fought in battles and

killed people, for which, although it was in the service of his country, he is sorry now. Afterwards he went to his own land and took a wife whom he loved, but before she came to his house he was sent back to this country upon a mission, about which they know. The Sheik of the Sweet Wells attacked that mission and killed all of them except one Abdullah, their lady Tama here, Bakhita who sat below, and himself. Him they tortured, cutting off his foot and putting out his eye, because he would not accept Islam, the false faith."

"It is so; it is so," said the great audience, "we found you —but ah! we took vengeance."

"He says," went on Achmet, "that of vengeance and forgiveness he will talk to them presently. Their lady Tama here nursed him back to life, and then he returned again to his own land."

"Must I stay to listen to all this?" said Edith fiercely.

"No need," answered Tabitha, "you can go back anywhere, but *I* shall stay to listen. Go on, Achmet."

Edith hesitated a moment, then not knowing whither to retreat, and being consumed with burning curiosity, stayed also.

"He returned," continued Achmet, in his summary, "to find himself disgraced, no longer a man in honour, but one in a very small position, because he was supposed to have neglected his duty, and thereby brought about the death of many, and rubbed the face of the Govenment in the dirt. He returned also to find that the wealth and rank which would be his by right of inheritance had passed away from him owing to an unexpected birth. Lastly, he returned to find that his wife would have nothing more to do with a man whom mutilations had made ugly, who was poor and without prospects, and at the mention of whose name other men looked aside. He sought his mother, and discovered that she was suddenly dead, so that he was left quite alone in the world. That hour was very bitter; he could scarcely bear to think of it even now."

Here Rupert's voice trembled, the multitude of his disciples murmured, and the lady Tama, moved by a sudden impulse, bent towards him as though to place her hand upon his arm in sympathy, then remembering, withdrew it, and muttered some words which he acknowledged with a smile. Now Rupert spoke again, and Achmet, who was a clever interpreter, continued his rendering:

"Zahed says that bitterness overwhelmed him, that faith in God departed, that his loneliness and his shame were such that he felt he could no longer live, that he went to a great river purposing to destroy himself by drowning."

Again there was a murmur which covered up the speaker's voice, and in the midst of it Dick whispered to Edith:

"Rather rough on you to drop in for this yarn, but it is always well to hear both sides of a case."

She made no answer. Her face was like that of the stone statue against which she leant. Again the unconcerned, brassy voice of the interpreter took up the tale:

"Zahed says that while he prepared for death in the river, in the mist above the water he saw a picture of their and his loved lady's face, and Allah brought into his mind a promise which he had made to her that if the ties of his duty were broken, he would return to be her brother and friend. Thus he was prevented from committing a great crime—a crime like that the man they had been speaking of had committed, and he had returned. As all there could bear witness, he, remembering the oaths which he had sworn to the wife who had rejected him, had been no more to Tama than a brother and a friend. This was not easy, since she and all of them knew that he loved her well, and he believed that she loved him well."

"Aye, that I do," broke in Mea, in a voice of infinite tenderness. "I love him more than life, more than anything that is, has been, or shall be. I love him, oh! I love him, as much as he loves me."

"It is so, we see with our eyes," said the multitude.

"Well, now, he came to the nut that lay hid in the rough stone of his story. His lot had been hard. They would all of them think it hard that because of their duty their lady and he must live as they lived, one, yet separated, practising the great doctrine of Renunciation, having no hope of children to follow after them."

The audience agreed that it was exceedingly hard.

"They thought so, and so it had been at first, yet it had come to this, they loved their state and did not wish to change it, they who looked forward to other things, and to a life when the righteousness which they practised here would bring them yet closer together than they had ever been. They were quite happy who spent their days without remorse for the past or fear for the future; they for whom death had no terrors, but was rather a gate of joy which they would pass gladly hand-in-hand. That was the nut of the story; bitter as it might be to the taste, it had in it the germ of life. Lo! they had planted it on the earth, and yet even here, although as yet they did not see its flower, it had grown to a very pleasant tree under the shade of which they rested for a while and were content. Let all of them there lay this poor example to their hearts. Let them not be discouraged when God seemed to deal hardly with them, like that poor man, their brother, who was dead by his own hand, since if in their degree they also practised Renunciation, made repentance, and for right's sake abstained from sin, they would certainly find a reward.

"Some of them had spoken of vengeance, that thirst for vengeance, which the other day had caused another of them to commit murder. Let them flee from the thought of it. Their lady here had practised vengeance upon the bodies of those cruel Arabs who had slain his people and tortured himself, but now neither he nor she were happier on that account. The blood of those misguided men was on their hands, who, if they had left them alone, would doubtless have

been rewarded according to their deeds, but not through them, or, what was far better, would have lived to repent and find forgiveness. Forgiveness was the command of the merciful God who forgave all that sought it of Him, and it should not be withheld even by the best of them who still had so much to be forgiven."

"Would you forgive that woman of yours who deserted you, Zahed?" cried Bakhita from below.

"Surely I forgive her," answered Rupert. "It would be strange if I did not do so, seeing that by her act she has made me happier, I think, than ever a man was before," and he turned and smiled again at Mea, who smiled back at him.

Then up in that audience stood a blind old teacher, a mystic learned in the law, one who was beloved of the people for his wisdom and his good deeds, and yet perhaps at heart somewhat jealous of the new white prophet to whom they had turned of late.

"Hearken, Zahed!" he said, "I with the others have listened to your address, and I approve its spirit as I deplore the crimes that were its text. Yet it seems to me that you miss the root of the matter. Answer me if I am wrong. God oppressed you; He tried you for His own reasons; He rolled you in the mire; He brought down your soul to hell. The wife of your bosom, she deserted you, when you were in trouble then she struck as only a woman can. She said: 'Beggar, be gone; remove your rags and hideousness from before me. I will shelter with a richer lord.' So you went, and what did you? You did not bow yourself before the decree of God, you did not say: 'I rejoice in the tempest as in the sunshine; I acknowledge that I have deserved it all, and I give thanks now that my mouth is empty as I gave them when it was full.' No; you said—be not angry with me, Zahed, for a spirit is in my lips and I speak for your instruction. You said: 'I will not bear this pain. My soul is hot, it hisses. I will quench it in the waters of death. I will drug myself with death; I will go

to sleep because God my Maker has dealt hardly with me.'

"Then God your Maker bowed Himself down and spoke to you out of heaven, by His magic He spoke to you; He showed you a face upon the waters, the face of one who loved you still, and thereby saved you alive. You came; you found the face which smiled on you; you kept the letter of your oath to the false woman, but you broke its spirit. You loved her, our lady Tama, and she loved you; you said, both of you: 'We renounce because we love so much. We are good lest in time to come our sin should separate us. To gain much you gave a little, you whose eyes are opened, you who see something of the truth, who know that this life is no more than the oasis of Tama compared to the great stars above, those stars which you will one day travel.'

"Listen to me, Zahed, I speak for your instruction. I do not blame you, nor do I think God will blame you who made you of the mud beneath His feet, not of the light about His head. He will have pity. He will say: 'Mud, you have done well—for mud.' But I am His advocate here, to-day it is given to me to be His voice. Answer Him a question now if you can. If not, remain silent and weep because you are still mud. You hold yourself bound to this base woman, who should be beaten with rods, do you not? You acknowledge it openly, who will not take another wife. You preach the doctrine of forgiveness to us, do you not? You say that you forgive her. Why? Nay, be silent, now the Voice is in my mouth—not in yours. Speak presently when you have heard it. You forgive her because her wickedness has worked your weal; because she has brought you to love and to honour among men.

"Well, now; hear me and make answer. If that accursed woman, that daughter of Satan, were to come hither to-day, if she were to say to you: 'I repent, who was wicked. I love, who hated. I put you in mind of the oath you swore. I demand that you leave the sweet lady at your side and the

people who worship you, and the gardens that you have made and the wells that you have digged, and return to live with me in a hell of streets upon which the sun never shines, that I may give you children to build up the pillars of your house, and that I may grow great in your shadow.'

"Tell us now, what would you answer her? Would you say: 'Is not my name Zahed? Therefore I come, I come at once;' and thereby show us that you are perfect indeed? Or, would you say: 'Woman, you built the wall, you broke the bridge, you dug the gulf. I am lame, I cannot climb; I am afraid, I dare not swim; I have no wings, I may not fly. I forgive you afar; I do not forgive you at my side. I love you and all mankind, but I will not touch your hand. I give to you the writings of divorce.' Would you speak thus, and let us see that you are still a man of mud? Answer now the question that God puts to you through my lips, Zahed. Or if you cannot answer, you who preach Renunciation and Forgiveness, here is mud, smear it on your forehead and be silent."

Now Mea had been listening, with a great and ever-growing indignation, to this long address, designed to set out one of those test cases which are so dear to Eastern religious thought and methods, and to force a holy man to admit that, after all, he is full of error.

"I at least will answer," she broke in, before Rupert could speak a word. "Who is this jealous-hearted, white-headed fool that fills the air with sand, like the Campsine blast; that stains the clear pool with dirt, like a thirsty camel; that says the Spirit of God is in his lips, those lips that utter wind and emptiness; that tries to convict of sin where there is no sin, and to show one who is a thousandfold his better, a new path to heaven? Did God then decree when a man has been rolled in mire and washed himself clean again, that he should return to the mire at the bidding of her who befouled him? Did God decree that a man should leave those with whom he

lives in innocence, to share the home of his betrayer whom he hates? Is it virtue to be made vile? Is it righteous to clothe oneself in the rags of another's wickedness? Make reply, you babbler, old in self-conceit, you who think to gain honour by defeating your lord in words before his people. Make reply, you that wrap yourself with words as with a garment, and sit upon pride as a sheepskin, and say, wherefore should the true be thrust aside for the false? Wherefore should *my* heart be widowed, that another who sowed thistles may pluck flowers?"

Now the old teacher plucked his beard and began in wrath:

"Do I, a learned man, one who has thought and studied long, come here to wrangle with a hungry woman who covets the fruit she may not eat—"

"Silence!" broke in Rupert, in his great voice—"silence! Tama, give not way to anger—it is not fitting, and you, my questioner and friend, speak no more words against the lady whom in your heart you love and honour. When that case of which you tell happens, as I pray it may not happen, then I will take counsel with my conscience, and do as it shall bid me. I have said."

Now Rupert turned to Mea to soothe her, for this talk had made her more angry than she had been for years, so angry that in the old days that holy teacher's life might well have paid its price; while the audience fell to arguing the point among themselves and were so occupied, all of them, that they never saw a woman with a shawl thrown over her head, who thrust her way through them till she stood in front of the platform.

CHAPTER XXII

EDITH AND MEA

EDITH had heard it all. Not one bitter taunt, not one rough word had that merciless interpreter glossed over. She had heard herself called "a woman who should be scourged with rods" and "a daughter of Satan." She had heard herself, while Dick sniggered behind her, and Tabitha strove to repress a smile that she felt to be unholy, compared to mire in which, if a man rolled, he could never be clean again, and to a sower of poisonous weeds, and this by that other hateful woman who had bewitched her husband with her beauty. She could bear no more; for once her bitter anger made her almost heroic. She would face them there and then. She would demand an answer to the question urged in such forcible language by that blind and sardonic Arab, whose pleasure it was to pick the holiness of other men to pieces. She hid herself in the shawl. She pushed herself through the crowd; she stood in front of the platform, then suddenly unveiled.

Mea saw her first; some instinct of intense antipathy caused her to look round and find her rival's eyes. Suddenly she stiffened, falling into that attitude which she assumed when, as judge, she passed sentence on a criminal. Then she spoke in English, asking, although already her heart knew the answer to the question, she who remembered well the picture in the locket that Rupert used to wear:

"Stranger, who are you who creep into my house not asked? And what seek you?"

Hearing her voice, Rupert looked round also. Next instant

he was clinging to the arms of his chair to prevent himself from falling out of it, while over his face there spread a look of woe and terror, such as a man might wear who suddenly thinks he sees a hated ghost come to summon him to hell. His heart stopped, his sight grew dim, a cold sweat burst out upon his forehead.

"I am the Lady Devene," Edith answered, "and I am here to seek my husband, Lord Devene, who sits at your side."

By now Mea had recovered herself, for she felt the crisis of her life had come, and her bold spirit rose to meet it. She grew quiet, quick, resourceful.

"Is it so?" she said. "Then that old teacher, he must be, what you call him, a prophet—or perhaps he hear you come. You want seek Lord Devene, him whom you spit on when he was Rupert Ullershaw Bey? Yes? Well, Zahed no look as though he wish to go away with you, his face all change," and she pointed to Rupert's agonised countenance.

"I am speaking to my husband, not to you, woman," said Edith.

Mea shook her beautiful head and smiled.

"Woman wrong word. I great lady here; lady whom he love but no marry—till you die, alas!"

Rupert still seemed unable to speak, and Edith positively choked with wrath, so, perhaps to prevent any awkward pause, Mea continued the conversation.

"Who those?" she asked, pointing with her finger at Tabitha and Dick, who, with the interpreter, were making their way towards the platform. "Your mama come to look after you? And him? Oh! I know. That gentleman you love. Him for who you turn Zahed into the street. Oh! I know, I know. Old woman down there with white head," and she pointed to Bakhita, who was watching all this scene with the grimmest interest, "she have magic; she show me his ugly face in water. He swim about in water with the tail

of a snake, head—man, heart—snake, you understand, yes? Bakhita show you some magic, too, if you like."

Now at last Rupert shook himself free from his faintness.

"Edith," he said, "why have you come here?"

"Really I begin to wonder," she answered, while she gathered herself together, "for I don't seem very welcome, do I? Also this place isn't pleasant, its inhabitants are too fond of personal remarks."

Then she paused and presently flung her words at him, few and swift and straight.

"I come, Rupert, to ask you to answer the riddle which that blind old dervish has been amusing himself by putting to you at such length. Will you return to your duty and your deserted wife? Or will you stop here, as the—the friend of that shameless person and head-priest of her barbarians?"

"Please, Edith," said Rupert, "be a little milder in your language. These people are peculiar, and my power here is limited; if you apply such names to Tama, and they come to understand them, I cannot answer for the consequences."

"I did not ask you to answer for the consequences, I asked you to answer my question," replied Edith, biting her white lips.

"It seems to require some thought," said Rupert sadly.

Then he lifted his hand and addressed the audience, who were watching what passed with wondering eyes.

"Brothers and sisters," he said, "a wonderful thing has happened. In speaking to you to-day about the crimes that have been done in Tama, I told you my own story for an example. Then the teacher yonder showed me how weak and evil I really was, and put a question to me as to whether, should she appear and ask it, I would take back the wife of that story, she that had wrought me evil in the past. Now this wife stands before me, and demands the decision which I said I would give when the time came. It has come—that evil day has dawned upon me who never thought to see it, forgetting that things have

changed in the matter of my fortunes across the sea. Yet, my brethren, shall I be wrong if I ask for a while to think? If, for instance, I say that when we meet again as is our custom on this same day of the next month, I then decide, and not before?"

"No, no, you will be right, Zahed," they murmured, the blind old mystic leading them with his shrill voice. "We will have it so." More, great men among them stood up here and there and shouted that he should not go, that they would gather their servants and guard the pass, and if need be, keep him prisoner, or—and they looked viciously at Dick and his companions.

Achmet translated their remarks, adding, on his own account: "This people in damned nasty temper—very private people and very fierce who love Zahed. You must not make them angry, or perhaps they kill us all. I came here to interpret, not to have throat cut."

Dick also seizing the situation with remarkable swiftness, was equally urgent and out-spoken.

"Don't show off any of your airs and graces here, Edith, please," he said, "I am not anxious to follow the example of our friend, the god upon the platform, and renounce the world in a wider fashion. That little tartar of a woman would jump at a chance of murdering us, and she can do it if she likes."

Only Tabitha, weary with standing, sank down on to a block of stone, and incidentally into the lap of a native who already occupied it, and scarcely heeding his wild struggles to be free, fanned herself with a broad-brimmed hat and remarked:

"Ach! do not trouble. If they kill us, they kill us. It is very interesting to hear them say their minds so well. I am most glad that we came."

"You hear their answer, Edith," said Rupert, "and you must understand my position. Have you any objection to make?"

"I understand your position perfectly, Rupert, and I am

quite aware that a man may find it difficult—most difficult, to escape from certain kinds of entanglements," and she glanced at Mea and paused.

"Wrong word again," murmured that lady, with a sweet smile; "no what you call it, no tangles, only one great rope of love, too thick to cut, too strong to break—much!"

"As for objections," went on Edith, without heeding this melodious and poetic interruption, "I could make scores, but since we don't wish to be butchered by your amiable *protégés*, perhaps I had better hold my tongue and give you a month in which to come to your right mind. Only I am by no means sure that I shall stop here all that time."

"Don't stop if you no like," broke in Mea again. "Please not—the road it always open, give you camel, give you soldiers, give you food, and write you letter afterwards to tell you how Zahed make up his mind. I can write very nice letter all in English, learn that at Luxor, or if you rather, write in Arabic."

At this sally Dick grinned, for it pleased his wounded soul to see Edith getting the worst of it for once in her life, and Tabitha burst out laughing. The general effect was to induce Edith to change her mind rapidly.

"Yes, I shall stop," she went on, as though she had never suggested anything else, "because I suppose it is my duty to give him every chance."

"Glad you stop," said Mea, "my humble people much honoured. Give you nice house, high up there on the mountain since in this month you catch great fever down here and perhaps stop too long," and turning, she issued a sharp and sudden order whereat men sprang up, bowed and ran to do her bidding.

"What's that?" asked Dick nervously.

"Nothing," said Mea, "only tell them make ready house on the mountain and take your things there and set guard about it so you no be hurt. Now I go. Good-night!" whereon she rose, bowed to her people, bowed to her guests, and then,

making a deep obeisance to Rupert, lifted his hand and with it touched her brow. After this she descended from the platform, and at its foot was instantly surrounded by an armed guard, in the midst of which, preceded by old Bakhita, Mea marched down the passage between the central columns of the great hall, while to right and left, as was their custom on these days of ceremony, her people prostrated themselves as she passed, shouting: "Tama! Tama!"

"Himmel," said Tabitha, "Himmel, she is charming! No wonder Rupert do love her, like all her folks. Look how they bow. Achmet, where is my photograph thing? I wish to take them quick."

"Mustn't take photograph here," answered Achmet gloomily; "they think that bad magic, great big evil eye. No photograph, please."

But Tabitha had already forgotten her intention and was advancing towards Rupert.

"My dear Rupert," she said, as climbing the platform she dropped into the throne-like chair vacated by Mea, and then bending forward, solemnly kissed him upon the brow. "My dear Rupert, oh! I am glad to see you, I cannot say how glad."

"I am glad to see you also, Tabitha," he answered, "though I wish we could have met under more pleasant circumstances."

"Ach! you are in a deep hole," she said, "down at the bottom of a well, but there is light above, and who knows, you may come out again."

"I don't see how," he answered sadly.

"No; but God sees. Perhaps He will pull you out. I am sorry for you, dear. I have no patience with Edith, and that Dick, I hate him now and always."

"Tell me a little about things," he said, "we may not have another chance."

So she told him all she knew. Dick and Edith had vanished back through the side door; the audience for the

most part had melted away, only a few of them remaining at the far end of the hall. As she spoke rapidly, mixing German and English words together, although his intelligence followed her, Rupert's mind wandered, as was its ancient fashion. He recalled, for instance, how Tabitha and he had once sat together upon another dais in a very different hall far away in England.

"You remember," he said suddenly, "that New Year's Eve at Devene, the night I got engaged, and what you told me then?"

She nodded.

"You said she would breed trouble," he went on; "you said she was very dangerous. Well, it is so, and now—what am I to do?"

"Nothing at all, just wait," she answered. "You have a month, and during that time you need only see her in public. In a month many things may happen. Indeed, I do think that things will happen," and once again that fateful look crept over the strong, solid face and into the quiet eyes, the same look that he had noted years ago when she sat with him on the dais in the hall at Devene. "God He does not desert men like you, Rupert, who have suffered so cruelly and behaved so well," she murmured, gently pressing his hand. "Look! Dick has come back and is calling me. When shall we meet again?"

"To-morrow," he said, "I cannot see her to-night. I will not see her privately at all till the month is up. You must make her understand."

"Oh! she understands well enough, and so does Dick, and so do I. But are they safe here?"

"Safer than in London, only they must not speak ill of the lady Tama. Good-night!"

"Good-night, dear Rupert," she said, and went away, leaving him seated there alone upon the platform.

. . . . . .

That night Tabitha and Edith slept in the house which Mea had assigned to them. It was situated upon a mountain-crest over two miles from the town of which it formed part of the fortifications, was cool, and commanded a beautiful view. To Dick Learmer was given a similar but somewhat smaller house belonging to the same chain of defences, but about five hundred yards away. Both of these houses were provisioned, and both of them guarded day and night, that no harm might come to the guests of the tribe.

So angry was Edith that for a long while she would scarcely speak to Tabitha, who, their meal finished, sat upon a kind of verandah or outlook place, a shut Bible upon her knees, looking at the moonlit desert upon the one hand, and the misty oasis on the other. At this game of silence her patient, untroubled mind was far stronger than that of Edith. At length the latter could bear it no longer; the deep peace of the place, which should have soothed, only exasperated her raw temper. She broke out into a flood of words. She abused Tabitha for bringing her here and exposing her to such insults. She named Mea by ill names. She declared that she would go away at once.

"Ah!" asked Tabitha at last, "and will you take Dick with you?"

"No," she answered; "I never want to see Dick or any of you again."

"That is unlucky for me," said Tabitha; "but since I have reached this nice place, I shall stay here the month and talk with Rupert. Perhaps if he and that pretty lady will have me, I shall stay longer. But I, too, do not want the company of Dick. As for you, dear Edith, if you wish to go, they told you, the road is open. It will save much trouble to everybody."

"I shall not go," exclaimed Edith. "Why should I leave my husband with that woman who has no right to him?"

"I am not so sure," answered Tabitha thoughtfully. "If my little dog is caught in a trap and is ill, and I kick it into the

street, and leave it there to starve, and some kind lady comes and takes my little dog and gives it a good home for years, can I say that she has no right to it just because I find out, after all, that it is a valuable little dog, and that I am—oh! so fond of it?"

"Please stop talking nonsense about little dogs, Tabitha. Rupert is not a dog."

"No; but then why should he have been treated as one? If such a dog would have learned to love its new mistress, is it wonderful that he should do the same? But have you learnt to care for him at last, that you should want him back so much, he who lives here good and happy?"

"I don't know," snapped Edith; "but I won't leave him with that other woman if I can help it; I don't trust all that Platonic nonsense. I am going to bed;" and she went.

But Tabitha still sat for a long time and gazed at the moonlit desert, there making her accustomed prayers.

"Oh! God in heaven," she ended them, "help those two poor people whom Thou hast tried so sorely," and as she spoke the words a conviction came into her mind that they would be heard. Then, feeling comforted, she too went to her bed.

In the morning Edith received a note from Rupert; it was the first time that she had seen his handwriting for many a year. It ran:

"DEAR EDITH,—I will not debate the strange circumstances in which we find ourselves, and I write to ask that during the ensuing month you will avoid all allusion to them. The facts are known to us both, to discuss them further can only lead to unnecessary bitterness, and perhaps prevent a peaceful solution of the trouble. If you agree to this, I write on behalf of the lady Tama and myself to say that we are ready to enter into a like undertaking, and that we shall be happy to see you here whenever you wish.

"If, on the other hand, you do not agree, then I think that we had best keep apart until the day when I have promised to give an answer to your question. A messenger will bring me your written reply. "RUPERT."

Edith thought a while, then she took a piece of paper and wrote upon it with a pencil:

"I agree. "EDITH.

"*P.S.*—I enclose a letter which I have for you. He wrote it shortly before he died. Also, there are some from the lawyers."

"After all," she reflected to herself, as she saw the runner depart swiftly, carrying her packet on the top of a cleft stick, "it will give me a little time to look round in peace. Rupert is right, it is no use wrangling. Moreover, he and that woman are masters here, and I must obey."

Within an hour the runner returned again, bearing another note from Mea, which, in very queer English, asked them both to honour them with their company at the midday meal. They went, and on the way met Dick, who had received a similar invitation. On arriving at the town, they found Rupert seated beneath the verandah of his house, and squatted upon the ground around him a considerable number of people, all of them suffering from various complaints, together with some women who held sick children in their arms. He bowed to them, and called out in a cheerful voice:

"Forgive me for a little while. I have nearly finished my morning's doctoring, and perhaps you had better stand back, for some of these ailments are infectious."

Edith and Dick took the hint at once, riding their animals into the shade of a tree a little way off. Not so Tabitha. Descending from her donkey with a bump, she marched straight to Rupert and shook his hand. Two minutes later they

perceived that she was helping him to bandage wounds and dispense medicines.

"How she can!" exclaimed Edith, "and the worst of it is she is sure to bring some filthy disease back with her. Just think of Rupert taking to doctoring all those horrid people!"

"They say he is uncommonly clever at it," answered Dick, "and will ride for miles to see a sick person. Perhaps that is why they are so fond of him."

"Why don't you go to help him?" asked Edith. "You studied medicine for two years before you went to the Bar."

"Thanks," he answered, "I think it is pleasanter sitting under this tree with you. At present I am not a candidate for popular affection, so I don't see why I should take any risks."

"Rupert doesn't mind risks," said Edith.

"No," he said, "one of his characteristics always was to like what is disagreeable and dangerous. In that fact lies your best chance, Edith. He may even make up his mind to abandon an existence which seems to suit him exactly and return to the joys of civilisation."

"You are even ruder than usual, Dick," she said. "Why did you come here at all? We never asked you."

"You cannot pretend, Edith, that gentleness has been *your* prevailing note of late. For the rest, considering that on the results of this inquiry depended whether I should be one of the richest men in England or a beggar, it is not strange that I came to look after my own interests," he added bitterly.

"Well, you know now," she answered, "so why don't you go away? Rupert is alive, therefore the property is his, not yours."

"Quite so; but even Rupert is not immortal. He might contract one of those sicknesses, for instance."

"No such luck for you, Dick," she said, with a laugh; "he is too much accustomèd to them, you won't get rid of him like that."

"I admit it is improbable, for he looks singularly healthy, does he not? But who knows? At any rate, he is a good-natured fellow; I may be able to come to some terms with him. Also," he added, in another voice, "please understand once and for all that I am going to see this play out, whatever you or anybody else may say or do. I was in at the beginning, and I mean to be in at the death."

Edith shrugged her shoulders, turning away, for there was a very unpleasant look upon Dick's face, and just at that moment they saw Rupert, who had washed his hands and changed his robe, riding towards them upon a white mule by the side of which walked Tabitha. He could not take off his hat because he wore a keffieh, but he saluted Edith by placing his fingers upon his forehead, and then stretched out his hand to her and to Dick.

"Forgive my dismounting, Edith," he said, in a pleasant voice, "but you remember what a dreadful cripple I am, and I haven't been able to grow a new foot, or even to get an artificial one here. I did send for the article, but it must have been made for a lady; at any rate, it was three sizes too small, and now adorns a black old beggar woman."

Edith laughed; somehow the thought of Rupert's mutilated state no longer filled her with horror.

"Mea is expecting you all to luncheon," he said, "if I may so call our unconventional meal. Will you come?"

She nodded, making a funny little face, and rode away towards Mea's house at Rupert's side.

"Did you get my note," she said suddenly, "and the enclosures?"

"Yes," he answered, "his letter is very painful—very painful indeed, and the others are interesting. But we have agreed not to talk about those things, haven't we, until the month is up?"

"Certainly, Rupert," she answered, in a gentle voice. "So far as I am concerned, the past is all gone. I am here now,

not to consider myself, but to do what you desire. I only wish to say that I am sorry if I spoke as I should not yesterday —and for many other things also, Rupert, but really it was hard to have to listen to all those bitter words, even if I deserved them."

"I understand—very hard," he said, flushing, "and now for the next month it is settled that we are going to be just friends, is it not?"

"Yes, Rupert, as you have ordered it," she whispered, and glancing at her, he saw that there were tears standing in her blue eyes.

"This business is going to be even harder than I thought," reflected Rupert to himself, and in another moment Mea, clad in her spotless white, was receiving them with gracious smiles and Oriental courtesy.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WHEEL TURNS

THIS meal in Mea's house proved to be the beginning of a very curious existence for the four persons chiefly concerned in our history. Every day, or almost every day, they met, and the solemn farce was carried on. Mea and Rupert played their parts of courteous hosts, Edith and Dick those of obliged and interested guests, while Tabitha watched them all with her quiet eyes and wondered what would befall when the truce came to an end. Soon she and Mea were very good friends, so good that from time to time the latter would even lift a corner of the veil of Eastern imperturbability which hid her heart, and suffer her to guess what pain and terrors racked her. Only of these matters they did not speak; not to do so was a part of the general conspiracy of silence.

Edith was with Rupert as often as possible; she even took long rides which she hated, in order to share his company, whilst with a feverish earnestness he discoursed to her of all things in heaven and earth, except those things which leapt to the lips of both of them. She watched him at his work, and learned to understand how great that work was and how well it had been done. She perceived that he was adored by all, from Mea herself down to the little children that could hardly walk, and began to comprehend the qualities which made him thus universally beloved. More—the truth may as well be told at once—now, for the first time in her life, they produced a deep impression upon her.

At last Edith began to fall in love with, or if that is too

strong a term, at any rate really to admire her husband, not his nature only, but his outward self as well, that self which to her had once seemed so hateful, especially when she compared him with another man. Now, by some strange turn of the wheel of her instincts, it was that other man who was hateful, from whom she shrank as once she had shrunk from Rupert, taking infinite pains to avoid his company, and still more the tendernesses which he occasionally tried to proffer; he who also had grown very jealous. The fact of Mea's obvious adoration of Rupert may, of course, in the case of a character like Edith's, have had much to do with this moral and physical *volte-face*, but it was by no means its only cause. Retribution had fallen upon her; the hand of Fate had pressed her down before this man's feet.

Yet the worst of it was that she made no real progress with him. Rupert was most courteous and polite, very charming indeed, but she felt that all these things were an armour which she could not pierce, that as he had once said, his nature and his spirit rose in repugnance against her. Twice or thrice she took some opportunity to touch him, only to become aware that he shrank from her, not with the quick movement of a man who desires to avoid being betrayed into feeling, or led into temptation, but because of an unconquerable innate distaste — quite a different thing. She remembered his dreadful words of divorce, how he had said that henceforth he hated her, and that even should she in the future swear that she loved him, he would not lay a finger-tip upon her. Why should he indeed when another woman, more faithful, more spiritual—and yes, she must admit it, more lovely, was the companion of his every waking thought and hour.

See Edith now after she has spent fourteen days in her husband's company. She is tired with the long ride she has taken in the hot sun just to be with him, feigning an interest in things which she did not understand, about the propagation of date-palms, for instance, as though she cared

anything whether they grew from seed or offshoots. Tired, too, with her long, unceasing effort to show him her best side, to look cool and attractive in that heat and mounted on a skittish horse which frightened her. (How, she wondered, did Mea contrive never to seem hot or to lose her dignity, and why did her hair always remain so crisp and unruffled even beneath her white head-dress?) Annoyed also by Dick, who had accompanied her home and showed his ever-growing jealousy in a most unpleasant fashion, firing arrow after arrow of his coarse sarcasm at her, even reminding her of that afternoon years ago when her husband was supposed to be dead and she became engaged to him. She had scarcely replied; it did not seem worth while, only in her heart she vowed that should she ever have an opportunity, she would be rid of Dick once and for all. Yes, she did not care what he might say or what letters he threatened to publish, she would face it out and have done with him, as she wished that she had found courage to do long ago.

Now she was in her own room, and stretched face downwards upon her angarib or native bedstead, she sobbed in the bitterness of her soul. All her wiles, all her charm could not prevail against that small but royal-looking Eastern woman with the ready wit, the single aim, the mysterious face and the eyes like Fate, who had risen up against her and taken with gratitude the man whom she had once rejected, contented if only she might own his heart. Had it been otherwise, quarrels might have arisen, or he might have wearied of her; but that was the worst of it, where there was no marriage there could be no wearying. Always she stretched before him a garden of Eden, a paradise from which he was turned back by the flame-sworded angels of his own strict righteousness and oath. And into the rival garden which she, Edith, had to offer, whereof the gates, once so locked and barred, now stood wide, he showed no wish to wander.

What would be the end of it, when, at the expiration of the month again she faced that alien multitude with their stony, contemptuous eyes? Oh! surely then she would hear that he had taken counsel with himself and that conscience of his; that he found no law which forced him to return to a woman who had spurned him; that he offered her his title and his wealth and wished her well, but that himself he would bide where he was and discuss philosophy, and doubtless other things, with his lady Tama, the beautiful and perfect.

It was too much. Edith gave way to grief uncontrolled, her sobs echoed in the empty room so loudly that Tabitha heard them through the thin partition wall and came in to see what was the matter.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

Edith in her night-dress sat up on the angarib, her face wet with tears, her hair falling about her shoulders.

"I suppose so," she answered. "At least I am unhappy, which is the same thing."

"What about? Has that Dick—"

"Oh! never mind Dick; I am tired of Dick."

"What is it, then? Rupert?"

"Yes, of course. Are you blind, Tabitha?"

"Ach! I think I see as far as most. But why should you weep over Rupert so loudly that I can hear you through a wall? He is very kind to you."

"Kind, kind, kind!" answered Edith, increasing her emphasis upon each repetition of the word. "Yes, he is kind as he would be to any troublesome woman who had wandered here. I do not want his kindness."

"What, then, do you want? His anger?"

"No; I want—his love."

"You can't buy that for less than nothing, especially when there is another merchant in the market," remarked Tabitha thoughtfully.

"I don't know what you call for less than nothing,

Tabitha. Is everything that I have to give less than nothing?"

"Mein Gott! I see. You do mean that you are in love with him yourself?"

"Yes, I suppose that is what I mean. At any rate, he is my husband—I have a right to him."

Again Lady Devene reflected, then said:

"I always did wonder if it would end so. If you can come to care, pity it was not long ago. Why have you put it off so long, Edith? Now I think that perhaps it will be too late. What's your English proverb?—one day behind the fair."

"If that is all you have to say, you might have stopped in your room," answered Edith, between her sobs.

"Himmel! what more can I say than the truth? I did not cook this pudding, Edith. You cook it, and you must eat it. What is the good to cry out that it is nasty now. Still I am sorry for you, my poor Edith, who find out that if you throw enough stones into the air, sometimes one fall upon your head."

"Go away, please," said Edith; "I don't want to be pitied, and I don't want to be lectured. Leave me alone to eat what you call my pudding."

"Very well," answered Tabitha quietly; "but you take my advice, you ask God to make it sweeter, which you always forget to do."

"I have forgotten too long, I am afraid," said Edith, throwing herself down again on the angarib and turning her face to the wall.

There were other sore hearts in Tama that night. For instance, Rupert could not fail to see, if not all, at any rate a great deal of what was passing in his wife's mind. He understood that she was earnestly sorry for what she had done and heartily wished it undone. He was sure, also, from his knowledge of their previous close relations, from the by no means

obscure hints that she gave him, and from what he observed of them when they were together, that throughout she had acted under the influence of Dick, who had made love to her both before their marriage and after his own supposed death, which influence no longer had weight with her, although she still greatly feared the man. Indeed, upon this matter he had other sources of information — Tabitha, who told him a great deal, and Dick himself who had tried to blacken Edith in his eyes by letting little facts escape him—accidentally. Thus it came out that he *had* been lunching with Edith alone on that New Year's Eve when Rupert returned to England, and by inference that they were then on exceedingly intimate terms.

As a matter of fact, this revelation and others had an opposite effect to that which was intended. They caused Rupert to make allowances for Edith, and to understand that what he had set down to mere cruelty and self-seeking, was perhaps attributable to some passion which possessed her for this despicable man. He knew enough of the world to be aware of the positive loathing with which a woman who is thus afflicted will generally look upon any other man, even one whom she has previously loved.

Now, pondered the gentle and compassionate Rupert, supposing that he being apparently dead, his wife in name had given way to this impulse and engaged herself to Dick with the usual affectionate ceremonies (and he gathered that something of the sort had happened), and that then there appeared that dead man as he was at the time. Well, should not allowances be made for her, after all, she who, he was sure, had already repented in sackcloth and ashes, and to whom this Dick was, to put it mildly, no longer agreeable?

Meanwhile, hard as he might strive to conquer it—for was not this an excellent opportunity to exercise his own doctrines of renunciation and forgiveness?—he was possessed by a longing which at times became almost uncontrollable, if not to

twist Learmer's neck, at least to kick him with contumely out of Tama, where, it may added, he was already making himself a nuisance in various ways.

Such was the case against himself. But on the other hand, he must face the terrible fact that those words which he had spoken in the London drawing-room were, so far as he was concerned, utterly irrevocable. The sudden detestation, the shrinking of body and of soul that he had then conceived for his wife, remained quite unaltered. To talk with her was well enough, but the thought of returning to her made him absolutely shudder.

Yet the fact that to enter on to married life with Edith would be to him the greatest purgatory; would mean also abandoning all his hopes and interests in order to seek others which he did not desire, could not, his conscience told him, affect the rights of the matter. If it was his duty to go, these things should not be considered. But there was Mea, who had to be considered. After all that had come and gone between them, was it his duty to abandon her also? even though the pure devotion and deep respect which he bore to her might perhaps be the real cause of much of the active repulsion his wife inspired in him the converse, in short, of her case with Dick.

Mea, he knew, was wrapt up in him; for his sake she had put away marriage and entered on the curious mode of life that had proved so unexpectedly happy and successful. If he left her, he believed that she would probably die, or would at least be miserable for the rest of her days. Could it be expected of him that because of an empty ceremony, whereof the other contracting party had at once violated the spirit, he must do this great wrong to a beloved woman, who had violated nothing except her own human impulses, which she, an Eastern, trod down in order that he might be able to keep to the very letter of his strict Western law?

The worst of it was that through all this terrible struggle,

while his soul drifted upon a sea of doubt, from Mea herself Rupert received not the slightest help. Whether it were through pride, or a stern determination to let things take their appointed course uninfluenced by her, she spoke no pleading word, she made no prayer to his pity or his love. Their life went on as it had gone for over seven years. They met, they talked they ministered to the sick, they dispensed justice, they balanced their accounts, just as though there were no Dick and no Edith upon the earth. Only from time to time he caught her watching him with those great, faithful eyes, that were filled with wonder and an agony of fear. It was on his head, and his alone, and sometimes he felt as though his brain must give beneath the pressure of this ordeal. He fell back upon the principles of his religion; he sought light in prayer and wrestlings; but no light came. He was forsaken; unhelped he wandered towards that fatal day, the day of decision.

Richard Learmer also had been observing events, and as a result, found himself in sore trouble. He perceived that Edith was drawing nearer to Rupert. At first he had thought that she was actuated by self-interest only, but during the last few days, many signs and tokens had convinced him that something deeper drove her on, that now the man attracted her, that she wished to win his love. Further, Tabitha had told him so outright, suggesting that the best thing he could do was to make himself scarce, as he was wanted by nobody. He had refused with a smothered oath, and gone away to chew the cud of his rage and jealousy.

It was a very bitter cud. His great fortunes had passed from him; they were the property of Rupert. The only creature that he had cared for was passing from him also; she and her money were going to be the property of Rupert, in fact as well as in name. Of course there remained the possibility that he would reject her, but in this Dick did not for one moment believe. There was too much at stake. It was inconceivable that a man would throw up everything in order to remain the sheik of an

Arab tribe, a position from which he might be deposed by any conspiracy or accident. Doubtless he was temporising merely to save his face with the other woman, and to make himself appear of more value in the eyes of Edith.

So Rupert was going to take everything and leave him absolutely nothing. What a difference the existence of this man made to him! If he had died! If he should chance to die! Then how changed would be his own future. Edith would soon drift back to him, after her fashion when Rupert was out of the way, and he, Dick, would be the master of her and of more wealth than even *he* could spend, the honoured lord of many legions, instead of a shady and discredited person with not a prospect on the earth, except that of the infirmary or the workhouse. If only a merciful Providence should be pleased to remove this stumbling-block!

But Providence showed no sign of stirring. Then why not help it? At first Dick shrank from the idea, to which, however, his mind became accustomed by degrees. Just for amusement, he considered half-a-dozen ways in which the thing might be done, but sinking the morality of the question, put them all aside as too risky. The world called such deeds by an ugly name, and if they were found out, avenged them in a very ugly fashion. Indeed, the fate of anyone who was suspected of having interfered with Rupert in this oasis would doubtless prove particularly unpleasant. It was not to be thought of, but if only Fate would come to the rescue, could he help it if by some fortunate chance he were appointed its instrument?

The student of life may sometimes have noticed that there does seem to exist an evil kind of entity which, with Dick, we may call Fate, that is on the look-out for trustworthy tools of his character, and now, just in the nick of time, that Fate made its bow to him. It happened thus. Dick had several natives with him, one of whom he had hired as a dragoman at Tewfikiyeh. When they started on their ride across the

desert, this man seemed well enough, but two days after they reached the oasis he began to be ailing. Apparently he suffered from ague and nervous depression, after which he developed glandular swellings in various parts of his body.

At first Dick, who, it will be remembered, had some acquaintance with medicine, thought that he was going to be very ill, but in the end the swellings burst, and he gradually recovered. When he was about again, Dick asked the man, who could speak English, what he considered had been the matter with him, whereon he replied that, although he said nothing of it for fear lest his companions should turn him out, he believed that he had been attacked by plague, as the day before he left Tewfikiyeh, where there were several cases, he had gone to visit a relative who died of it while he was in the house.

"Indeed," said Dick; "then I bid you say nothing of it now, for though I think you are mistaken, if once that idea got round, these people would quarantine us all upon the mountain-top, or turn us into the desert."

Then, as no one else seemed to be unwell, he tried to dismiss the matter from his mind, nor did he mention it at all.

A few nights later; it was on the seventh day after Edith, weeping on her angarib, had made her confession to Tabitha, Dick returned from the town in a very evil temper. Feeling that a crisis was at hand, and that he must come to terms while he could, he had attempted to make more confidences to Rupert, and had even hinted that if the latter were interested in them, there existed certain letters written by Edith which he might like to read. Rupert said nothing, so taking his silence as an encouragement, Dick went on:

"Look here, Rupert; speaking as one man to another, you understand, of course, that I am in a most difficult position. I thought myself the heir to about a million pounds' worth of property, but the happy circumstance of your having survived

deprives me of everything. I thought also that I was the proud possessor of the reversion to your wife's affections; indeed, she left me little doubt upon *that* point, for which of course you, who were nominally dead, cannot blame her. These, too, must go with the rest, since naturally Edith knows on which side her bread is buttered. Now I make you a business proposition: You provide me with what I must have, enough to live on—let us say, a capital sum of £300,000, which you can very well spare, and we will balance our accounts once and for all."

"And if I don't?" asked Rupert quietly, for he wished to get to the bottom of this man's baseness.

"Then," answered Dick, "I am afraid that instead of a sincere friend Edith and yourself will find me, let us say, a candid critic. There are many ill-natured and envious people who would be glad to read those letters, and, like the Sibylline books, they may go up in price."

"Have you them here?" asked Rupert.

"Do you take me for a fool," he answered, "to trust such precious documents to the chances of desert travel, or possibly to the investigations of Arab thieves? No; they are safe enough in England."

"Where you intend to use them for purposes of black-mail."

"That is an ugly word, Rupert, but I will not quarrel with it, who, as I have remarked, must live."

Now Rupert turned on him.

"I don't believe," he said, "that there is anything in your letters which either Edith or I need fear; I am sure that she would never commit herself too far with a man like you. Dick Learmer, you are a villain! You have been at the bottom of all the unhappy differences between Edith and myself. It was you, I have discovered from Tabitha and from letters which have reached me, who got me sent to the Soudan immediately after my marriage, as I believe—God

forgive you!—in the hope that I should be killed. It was you, by your false information and plots, who subsequently blackened my character, and as soon as I was thought to be dead, tried to take my wife. Now, unless you can be bought off, you threaten to blacken hers also, and indeed, have already done so to some extent. I repeat that you are a villain. Do what you like; I will never speak to you again," and lifting the palm riding switch which he held in his hand, Rupert struck him with it across the face.

With a savage curse Dick snatched at his revolver.

"Don't draw that if you value your life," said Rupert. "You are watched, and whether you succeed in murdering me or not, you will be instantly cut down. Take my advice; go for a few days' shooting on the hills until your people can get the camels up from the far grazing lands, and then march. Be off now, and don't attempt to speak to either Edith or myself again, or I will have you bundled into the desert, with your camels or without them."

So Dick went with a face like the face of a devil, and with a heart full of hate, jealousy, and the lust of vengeance.

When he reached his house, it was reported to him that another of his people was very sick in a little outbuilding. He looked at him through the window-place, and after what the first man had told him—having refreshed his memory by reading up its symptoms in his handbook of medicine—had not the slightest difficulty in recognising a bad and undoubted case of plague, which, doubtless, had been contracted from the dragoman who recovered. Now Dick made up his mind at once that he would take Rupert's advice and go on a three or four days' shooting trip. Accordingly, he gave the necessary orders to start an hour before the dawn; then he sat down and thought a while, rubbing the red mark on his cheek where Rupert's whip had struck him.

How could he be revenged? Oh! how could he be revenged? Of a sudden, a positive inspiration arose in his

mind. Rupert was an amateur doctor; Rupert loved attending to the sick, and here was a case well worthy of his notice. Perhaps that Fate for which he had longed was appointing him, Dick, its instrument. He took a piece of paper and wrote this note:

"A desire to help another alone induces me to communicate with you. One of my men is very ill with some sort of fever. Under all the circumstances, I cannot stop to nurse him myself, as otherwise I should like to do, having, you remember, asked your kind leave to shoot, and made arrangements to start at dawn. Perhaps if you have time you will visit him and give him some medicine; if you do not, I fear that he must die.

"R. L."

Summoning the recovered dragoman who was to be left behind to see to the camels when they arrived, he bade him [illegible] as the shooting expedition [illegible] he were questioned, to [illegible] he did not know [illegible] ed Dick to [illegible] uld blame [illegible] was [illegible] ck [illegible] m [illegible] e [illegible] d

t[illegible]
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mail."
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it, who, a[illegible]
Now Rup[illegible]
"I don't be[illegible]
letters which eit[illegible]
would never comn[illegible]
Learmer, you are a [illegible]
of all the unhappy [illegible]
It was you, I have [illegible]
letters which have reac[illegible]
Soudan immediately after [illegible]

"So! It was reported to me that he started at dawn to
To see a sick man up yonder at Learmer's house."
[illegible]dith.
[illegible]oice was anxious, for she feared that he was about to
[illegible]er go you?" asked Mea, who met him.
[illegible]e, and started for the place where the patient
[illegible]ved the letter, and about seven o'clock
[illegible]rode away with his attendants.

hunt buck for some days on the mountain slopes. Why does he not doctor his own sick, he who told me that he understands medicine?"

"I advised him to go out hunting, Mea, and afterwards to leave this place."

"I know. You struck him, did you not? A strange thing for you to do, Rupert."

"I am ashamed to say I did," he answered. "That man is a low fellow and a slanderer, Mea."

"I know that also, but whom did he slander this time, the lady yonder, or me? Nay, I will not ask, but I say to you, Rupert, beware of a low fellow and a slanderer whom you have struck and who wished to draw his pistol on you."

"I can look after myself, I think," he replied, with a laugh.

"Yes, Rupert, you can face a lion or an elephant, but you hold your head too high to see a snake. Of what is this servant sick? I heard that they had strange illness up there."

"I don't know; Nile fever, I suppose. Will tell you when I have seen him."

"You should eat before you visit a fever case; have you done so?"

"No; I am not afraid of fevers, and I can't breakfast so early," and he made as though he would go on.

"One moment," she said, laying her hand upon his bridle. "Why did you not come to visit me last evening? As our hours together perhaps may be few, I miss you."

"I'll tell you," he answered, smiling. "I was engaged in making my will, which took a lot of thinking though it is short enough. You see, Mea, I am a very rich man now, and it so happens that under our law I can leave my property as I desire, because the settlements are at an end, which he from whom I inherited it could not do. Now, after that trouble with Learmer I remembered that if I die, as we all may do, he would probably take my lands and wealth, which I did not wish. So as the lawyers in England wrote to me to do, I

made a will, signed and had it witnessed properly by four of our people who can write, and gave it to Bakhita to keep for the present. Now, Mea, let me go and see this man."

"May I come with you?" she asked.

"Nay; how can I tell from what he suffers. I will be back presently."

CHAPTER XXIV

RENUNCIATION

RUPERT went into the outbuilding where the sick man lay and examined him. His eyes were bloodshot, his tongue was black, he had glandular swellings, and his temperature was nearly 106. Moreover, he was passing into a state of coma. He felt his pulse, which was dropping, and shook his head. In his varied experience as an amateur doctor he had never seen a case like this.

Leaving the man, Rupert went into the house to mix some quinine, for he knew not what else to give him. On the table a book lay open which he recognised as a medical work, and while he manipulated the quinine and the water, his eye caught the heading at the top of the page. It was "Plague." That gave him an idea, and he read the article. Certainly, the symptoms seemed very similar, especially the bubonic swellings, but as personally he had never actually seen a case of plague, he could not be sure. He called the servant in charge of the house and questioned him, that same dragoman who had recently been sick and recovered, but was still very weak. With a little pressure he told Rupert all; how he had visited his relative who was dying of the plague, and as he believed suffered from it himself, like the other man in the hut. Now Rupert was quite sure, and set about taking precautions, sending down to the town for guards to form a cordon round the place, and so forth.

Meanwhile the patient became rapidly worse and he went in to attend to him, staying there till about two hours later,

when he died. After seeing to the deep burial of the body, Rupert went to Edith's house on his way back to the town to warn them of what had happened. Strolling about near it under her white umbrella he found Tabitha and told her the bad news, which personally did not alarm her. She inquired where Dick was, and he replied that he had gone on a hunting expedition, but luckily left his medicine book behind him open at the article which gave him a clue. Next she asked to see the letter which Dick had written to Rupert, and taking it from his pocket, he handed it to her. Tabitha read it attentively.

"I see, Rupert, you have quarrelled with him at last," she said. "Ach! what a coward that man is—" then a light flashed in her eyes, and she added: "No, I understand now. It is a little trick of dear Dick's; he knows it is the plague, he runs away, he sends for you, he hopes that you will catch it. Mein Gott! he is not only a coward, he is a murderer; you quarrel with him—what you say?—you beat him? Well, he hit you back with the plague, or try to."

Rupert began to laugh, then checked himself and said:

"No, Tabitha, he would scarcely be such a brute as that. Why! assassination is nothing to it. Anyhow, I am not afraid; I do not catch things."

"You do not know the dear Dick; I do," she replied grimly. "Go home, Rupert, at once, burn the clothes you are wearing, sit in smoke, wash yourself all over with soaps, do everything you can."

"All right," he answered, "don't frighten Edith; I will take precautions."

He did, with the result that it was past two o'clock before he could find time for food, he who had eaten nothing since seven on the previous night.

For the next three days, knowing her terror of infectious diseases, every morning he sent a message to Edith that she must not see him, but with Tabitha and, of course, with Mea, he associated as before, since neither of them

would listen to his warnings. There had been no further cases amongst Dick's people, or elsewhere, and although his camels were now ready, Dick himself had not yet returned. It was reported that he was enjoying excellent sport on the hills.

Rupert thought very little more about the plague, however, for he had other things on his mind. Within four days the month would be up, and he must give his answer to the great question. Edith, whom for her own sake he still refused to see, had taken a desperate step; she had sent him a letter.

"Why do you keep me away from you?" (she wrote). "Of course I know that I used to be afraid of illnesses, but I don't care any more about them now. Sometimes I think it would be a good thing if I did catch the plague and it made an end of me and my wretched life. Rupert, I know you forbade me to speak to you about these matters until next week, but you never said that I mightn't write, and I will write upon the chance that you may read. Rupert, I am a miserable woman, as I deserve to be, for I have been very wicked. I acknowledge it all now. Dick has been my curse. When I was still quite a child, he began to make love to me; you know how handsome and taking he was then, and I fell under his influence, which for years I could never shake off. I tried to, for I knew that he was bad, but it was no good, he attracted me, as a magnet attracts a bit of iron. Then you came home, and I really did admire you and respect you, and I was very flattered that you should care for me. Also, I will tell you all the truth, I thought that you were going to be a peer and wealthy, and that you had a great career before you, and I wished to be the wife of such a man. Dick of course was furiously jealous; he insulted me upon the very day that you proposed to me, and because I would not be turned from my purpose, he set to work to avenge himself upon us both. It was he who gave the War Office the idea of sending you out

on that wretched mission, and who afterwards took away your good name.

"But, Rupert, I did not know all this at the time when you were supposed to be dead. I let Dick, who seemed to be turning out better then, regain his influence over me. That day on which you came home I had become secretly engaged to him. This will help to explain what followed. Really, I was out of my mind and not responsible. Afterwards, in my distress, I wrote Dick some foolish letters, which he has held over my head ever since I refused to have anything more to do with him. Also, I would have asked your pardon and tr ed to make it up with you if I had known where you were gone. But I did not know, and I was afraid to inquire, for fear of betraying the shameful facts.

"Rupert, it is true that I have grown to hate Dick, as much as I once loved him, if I ever did love him. Since I have found out how vile and treacherous he is, that it was he who set to work to blacken your reputation, as afterwards he has done by mine, and the rest of it, I have loathed him; but he follows me like my shadow and threatens me. I cannot cast him off, and if he says things about me, and shows those letters, who will believe that I am innocent—I with whom my own husband will have nothing to do? I shall be a ruined woman. Even here he has followed me; yes, and the wicked wretch tried to murder you, I am sure, by giving you that sickness. Well, thank Heaven! he seems to have failed there.

"Rupert, my husband, before the God that made me, I tell you the honest truth. I love you now, body and soul; it was only Dick that stood between us, and he is gone from me for ever. I am miserable because I may not be near you, and, if you will forgive all the past, and come back to me, no man in the world shall have a better wife, or one more obedient to his wishes. I know it is much to ask; I know I do not deserve it, and I know, too, that this beautiful lady Mea

loves you, and that she is as true and good as you are. Oh! Rupert, Rupert, don't break my heart; don't turn me out to wander again in the wilderness alone. If so, I do not know what will happen to me, but I think that I shall go to the bad, like many another poor creature. At any rate, it may be amusing while it lasts. Rupert, be merciful, as you hope for mercy.—Your wife (for I suppose that I still have a right to sign myself so), "EDITH."

This letter produced a great effect upon Rupert, as its writer had hoped that it would do. When he received it he was already low-spirited, but after reading it his depression became acute. The piteous way in which Edith made the best of a bad case; her evident and honest repentance, and the curious heart-change which, as she declared and as he half believed, now inclined her towards himself, all touched him deeply, especially the repentance.

Yet he could not but see that almost every argument she used might be urged with even greater effect upon behalf of Mea, who wrote no letters and made no prayer. Why should Mea's heart be broken? Why should Mea be left to wander in that lonely wilderness whereof Edith spoke, or perhaps to take to those common courses of despair—Mea, who had never offended, who had always played an angel's part towards him?

Of course the only answer was that he was married to Edith, and that he was not married to Mea; that he had taken Edith for better or for worse, and that to them applied the ancient saying: "Those whom God has joined together, let no man put asunder." He knew well enough in which direction his own feelings lay. Yet, what right had he to thrust her out, his wife, whom he had asked to marry him? On the other hand, what right had he to desert Mea, the woman who had saved and sheltered him?

Rupert was sore perplexed; he could find no answer to

these problems. He wrote a note to Edith thanking her for her letter, the contents of which he said he was considering, adding that he was quite well, but she had better still keep away from him for a while. Then he took a sudden resolution. He would go to Mea, and lay the whole matter before her.

Once again they sat in that room in which, after weeks of blindness, he had recovered his sight. His story had been told, the letter had been read, there it lay upon the ground beside them.

"And now, Rupert," asked Mea quietly "what shall you do?"

"I don't know," he answered passionately. "I have come to ask you."

She looked at him and asked again: "Which is it that you love, your wife or me?"

"You know well," he replied. "It is you, and no other woman, you now and for ever. Why do you make me tell you so again?"

"Because I like to hear it, Rupert," she said, with her slow smile. "But it does not make the choice easier, does it? On the one side, love; on the other your law. Which will win, love or your law?"

"I have come to you to tell me, Mea."

She looked upwards as though seeking an inspiration, then spoke again.

"I will be no stumbling-block in your path of righteousness. Was it for this that I was given to you? Love is longer than your law, Rupert, and is not that doctrine which we practise named Renunciation? It seems that those who would reap must sow."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, Rupert, that this woman who has behaved so ill repents, and what says our Book—the Book you taught me to

believe? 'Judge not, that ye be not judged!' I mean that since she has kept its letter, that oath still stands between you and her."

"Then I must leave you?" he muttered hoarsely.

"Yes, Rupert, I suppose so."

"And what will become of you then?"

"I," she replied, with another of her sweet smiles; "oh! what does it matter? But if you wish to know, I will tell you. I think that I shall die, and go to wait for you where love remains, and your law is finished. Shall we agree that together, my Rupert?"

His hands trembled, and the veins swelled upon his forehead.

"I can't," he said hoarsely; "God forgive me, I can't—yet. You are nobler than I, Mea."

"Then, Rupert, what?"

"Mea," he said, "we have still four days. Something might happen in those four days. Perhaps God may be pleased to help us in some manner unforeseen. If not, at the end of them I will accept your counsel, however cruel it may be; yes, even if it kills us both."

"Good!" she answered, with a flash of her eyes, "such words I looked to hear you speak, for shall the preacher of a faith fly before its fires? The sooner we are dead, the sooner will there be an end—and a beginning."

"Aye," he echoed, breaking into English, "an end and a beginning."

. . . . . .

Another two days had gone by, and once more Rupert and Mea sat together. They were making arrangements for the forthcoming gathering in the temple; also, he was giving her an account of his stewardship, he who it seemed must so soon depart. He was ill; he was troubled. He faltered in his speech, forgetting the Arabic words, his head bent forward over the book of accounts. Then suddenly he placed his

hands upon the edge of the table and raised himself with a smothered exclamation of pain.

"What is it?" she asked wildly, as he sank back into his seat.

"Nothing," he answered, in a faint voice. "It was as though a sword passed through me, that is all."

"Oh! Rupert," she cried, "you are ill."

"Yes, Mea," he said presently, "I am ill. I think that God *has* shown us a way out of our troubles, and for that blessed be His name. Mea, I have the plague. Leave me; leave me at once."

"Aye," she answered, setting her lips, "when they take you from me dead, but never before."

. . . . . .

Two more days and Rupert was dying with the dawn. By his side knelt Mea, and in a chair at the end of the shadowed room, tears streaming down her placid face, and the grey-haired Bakhita crouched crooning at her feet, sat Tabitha. Edith was not there. Rupert had refused to allow her to be admitted, lest she also should contract the plague. Sometimes he was conscious, and sometimes he sank into sleep. His eyes opened, he woke again and turned to Mea.

"Beloved," she whispered in his ear, "I have hidden it from all save Bakhita, but I have that which I must tell you at last. Our merciful God has called me—I die also. Before midday I follow on your road. Wait for me, Rupert."

He smiled, and whispered: "I understand. I will wait—surely, surely!"

Then he stretched up his arms. She sank into them, and for the first time their lips met. It was their kiss of farewell and of greeting.

"Bakhita," said Mea presently in a clear and ringing voice, "it is done. Come; tire me in those robes that I have made ready, my bridal robes. Be swift now, for my lord calls me."

The stern-faced, aged woman rose and obeyed. Tabitha knelt in prayer by the corpse of Rupert, and messengers swiftly spread the news that Zahed had departed from his people. A while later, as high and shrill the Eastern death-wail broke upon the silence, a door burst open and in rushed Edith.

"Oh! is it true, is it true?" she sobbed.

Tabitha pointed to the shrouded form of Rupert.

"Come no nearer," she said, "lest you should die also—you who are not ready to die."

The two women, Edith and Mea, stood face to face with each other; Edith, dishevelled, weeping; Mea, a strange and glorious sight in the rays of the rising sun that struck on her through the open window-place. She was clad in silvery robes that flowed about her; in her weak hand swayed the ancient sceptre of her race, upon her breast lay a pectoral of Isis and Nepthys weeping over dead Osiris; above her outspread hair was set that funeral crown worked in thin gold and enamelled flowers which once she had shown to Rupert. Her wide eyes shone like stars, and the fever that burned upon it seemed to give to her mysterious face a richer beauty.

"I greet you, lady," she said to Edith. "Well have I nursed our lord, but now he has passed from us—home, and I—I follow him," and she pointed over the shattered temple and the wall of mountains upwards to the splendid sky.

"You follow him; you follow him!" gasped Edith. "What do you mean?"

By way of answer, Mea tore open her white wrappings and showed her bosom marked with those spots of plague that appear only just before the end.

"It was his last and best gift to me," she cried in Arabic. "Soon, very soon we two shall have done with separations and with griefs. Hearken you, his lady according to your law. He had determined that to-morrow he would have gone back with you whom he forgave, as I do. But we prayed, he

and I—yes, knee by knee we prayed to our God, that He would save us from this sacrifice, and He has answered to our prayer. Behold! we who have followed the way of the Spirit inherit the Spirit; and we who renounced, renounce no more. To me it was given to save his life; to me it is given to share his death and all beyond it through light, through dark—forever and forever.

"Way now, make way for Tama who comes to her lord's bed!"

Then while they gazed and wondered, with slow steps Mea reeled to the couch upon which the corpse of Rupert lay; uttering one low cry of love and triumph, she cast herself beside him, and there she died.

"Now," said the quiet voice of Tabitha, as she looked upward to heaven over the ruined temples of a faith fulfilled and the cruel mountains of our world—"now, who will deny there dwells One yonder that rewards the righteous and smites the wicked with His sword?"

FINIS

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